written by
TEREN MIKAMI
EKU Illustrated by
TAKESHIMA
NOVEL 5
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

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THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY
I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
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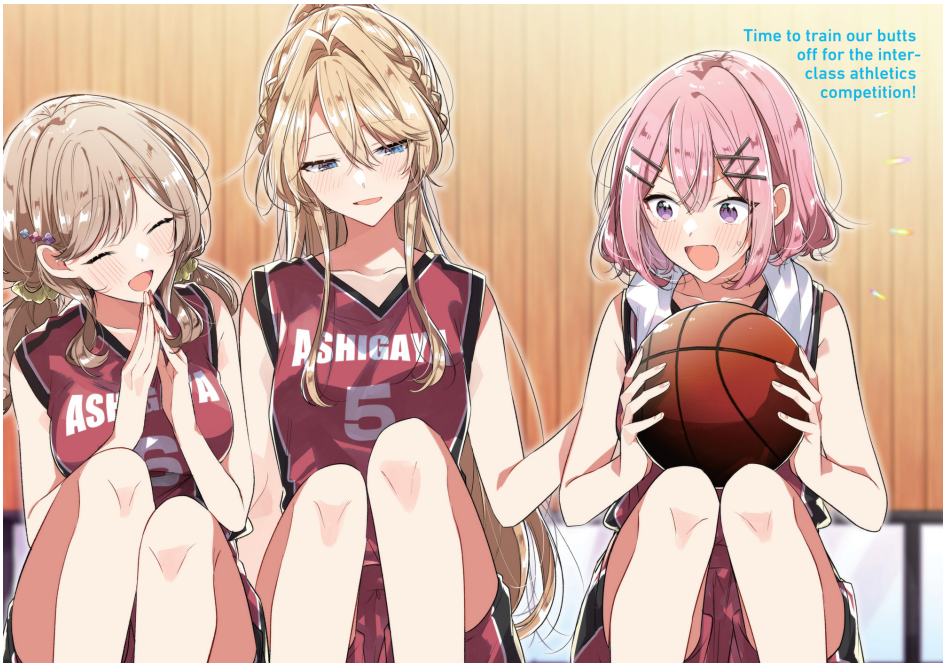
CHARACTERS
KOYANAGI KAHO
ODUKA MAI
KOTO SATSUKI
SENA AJISAI
AMAORI RENAKO

Hanatori-san lifted my leg, and I lost my balance.
"Whoa!"
"Pardon me, coming through."
HITOE HANATORI
"Couldn't you have said that *before* you picked up my leg?!"
"How does this feel?"
"It's really embarrassing..."
"You have no cause for concern. I am a certified esthetician, so I have faith in my body care abilities."


Time to train our butts off for the inter-class athletics competition!

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WRITTEN BY

Teren Mikami

ILLUSTRATED BY

Eku Takeshima

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHIGA KOIBITONI NARERUWAKE NAIJAN, MURIMURI!
(MURI JA NAKATTA!?)
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TRANSLATION: TNFWIBYLU Translation Team
ADAPTATION: Harry Catlin
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Jennifer Elgabrowny
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Jehanne Bell
EDITOR: Callum May
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
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Prologue

YUP, THAT'S ME right there—your totally average first-year high school girl, Amaori Renako—backed up against a wall. Directly in front of me stood a girl who looked at me the way a snake stares down a frog. We were presently in an empty classroom during lunch break, and she had me trapped in a truly magnificent kabedon.

"I'd appreciate your answer any day now," she said. The way she said it, so matter-of-fact, like it was just business, made me curl in on myself.

"Eep."

Her long, smooth, perfectly split-end-free hair shut out the rest of the world like curtains. I was boxed in by the smell of her perfume.

Koto Satsuki-san. Personality wise, she was cold and blunt, but she had her warm and friendly side too. She was actually a really nice person. Well. Maybe. That might be a bit of a stretch. At any rate, she was a very dear friend I made in high school—or rather, that's what I *assumed*.

"Amaori," she said, her voice hard and crisp.

It was the beginning of October, the bonus level known as Fall, aka the most pleasant of all the four seasons in Japan, lying between its sweltering summers and chilly winters. And yet, in spite of that, I started to drip sweat.

Outside in the schoolyard, I could hear the boys having a grand old time playing some sports game. The interclass athletics competition was just around the corner, and they seemed to be getting more hyped by the day. But in this empty classroom, the only sound was my labored,

frantic breathing. I was so dizzy, I almost felt lightheaded.

"I-I keep telling you, there's no freaking way," I squeaked, like one of those plastic toys you squeeze. "There's no freaking way I can be your lover!"

Yup. This all started because of that message Satsuki-san sent me. See, a whole bunch of things went down that ultimately culminated in me having to make a decision the other day. At that point, I made the only choice I could. The idea that I might look back on it later and want to take it all back didn't even cross my mind. I just acted, and the other two you-know-whos accepted me. And that was that!

Well, that's how I had to consider it, or else I'd be squashed flat. This late in the game, it'd be way rude to be like, "Oh my god, I'm looking back on it and I've changed my mind! I take everything back!" I'd straight-up die.

So, yeah. Anyway, let's move on from that sudden mental health slump.

That was the context for Satsuki-san's decision to get in on this as well. *You should go out with me too,* she'd said. I know it's awful to crap all over someone's serious feelings when they ask you out, but her timing was so whack that I couldn't help but think she was just jumping on the bandwagon after Mai and Ajisai-san. I mean, it was literally moments after I got two girlfriends. "Me too"? Really? Is *that* how you ask a girl out?

So that's why I'd been giving Satsuki-san the slip until she finally caught me today on lunch break and brought me to this empty classroom. And now we were here.

She put a hand to her chin even as she kept me pressed up against the wall. "Why not?" she asked.

"What do you *mean* 'why not'?!"

Her question was as innocent and naive as, “Hey, where do babies come from?”

Maybe she legit didn’t get it. So I looked away and told her, “Well, I, uh. I’m already dating someone else.”

Saying it out loud shot a bullet named reality straight into my heart. I took damage too.

There was a beat. And then she said, “Your point being?”

No. No, no, no, no.

“So that means I can’t go out with you. Right?” I said.

“Well, at this point, what difference does another one or two people make?”

“Y-you can’t just say that!”

I looked back at her, and our eyes met. Oh god. Satsuki-san was one of the prettiest girls I’d ever laid eyes on—celebrities included—which meant that having her face up close always struck me as more frightening than alluring. Long eyelashes framed her narrow, almond-shaped eyes. Her aloof beauty made her seem like a snow witch who’d freeze you in place if you got too close. She had a great body too; she was taller than me, but, for some reason, she had a smaller face. She was slender but not bony—basically, her build was graceful. And don’t tell anyone I said this, but I’d seen her boobs, and they were freaking incredible. (This last part delivered in a whisper.)

She was just so pretty that the pressure she exerted was too strong. I felt like I was going to succumb to it. But I somehow managed to hold out and rally my almost defeated spirits, because there was one thing, no matter if we were talking about Satsuki-san or anyone else, that I couldn’t back down on.

“I-it’s not just a matter of numbers,” I said. “That’s not why I’m

dating them… I thought about it for ages and ages and then came to that decision. It's kinda messed up to go and start bringing numbers into it…"

I'd left her on read for eons precisely because I hadn't been able to tell her that straight-out. But now I'd finally made it happen. Still, there was no denying that I definitely ran out of steam toward the end there. Bluh.

Only silence followed my rejection. It unnerved me, so I snuck a look at Satsuki-san's face to see what she was thinking. She looked back at me coolly, perfectly nonchalant.

"Oh? That's nice," she said.

Wait, was she even listening to me? Now I was starting to have some doubts.

"Besides," I pouted, giving her puppy-dog eyes, "it's not even like you really have a crush on me or anything, do you?"

I was expecting she'd just hit me with the same affectionless drivel she'd monotoned at me before, like, "Wow. I adore you. I love you so much. Mwah, mwah, mwah."

However.

"Good question," she said, running her hand through her hair, and then she obnoxiously refused to elaborate further. At this stage, she wasn't even trying to hide her lack of feelings for me!

"Gh! You're just trying to use me to piss off Mai again, aren't you? Gee, what am I to you, Satsuki-san? Chopped liver?"

She was practically unfazed even when I shouted in her face. In fact, she leaned in closer.

"Whoa, hold the phone," I said. This was going nowhere good. Her pale skin and her lips, like tiny flowers blooming through a blanket of

snow, filled my vision. And then I…

…shrieked “N-no!” and pushed her away. I couldn’t control how much oomph I put into it, so it turned out to be a real shove and a half. But even so, she only moved back slightly and didn’t so much as wobble. This girl was strong. Phew. That was a slight relief. Wait, no, now wasn’t the time for that. I wasn’t out of the woods yet.

“N-no, we can’t,” I said. “That’s not appropriate, Satsuki-san.”

My heart pounded. If I hadn’t stopped her, that would have led to a kiss, right? I mean, on the one hand, I felt like even Satsuki-san wouldn’t be so gauche as to make the moves on someone who’d just got herself a brand-spanking-new girlfriend or two. But on the other hand… that sounded exactly like something Satsuki-san might do. This was Schrödinger’s kiss.

“…Very well,” she said. She traced her lower lip with her finger, her face blank. I still had no idea what was going on in her mind. Was she mad at me?

“Not particularly,” she said. “I don’t feel much of anything, really.”

“Did you read my mind again?” I asked.

“I did not. You’re simply far too straightforward.”

I never understood what Satsuki-san meant by the things she did, but she had me all figured out. No fair.

“Okay, so what was all…*that*…about?” I asked. I wiped my sweaty brow with my handkerchief. Mind you, I knew that there was no chance in hell she’d tell me even if I asked her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “For taking up your time, that is.”

Then, with a flip of her hair, she made to leave. Just as she did, I was struck with the feeling that she was abandoning me.

“Oh, wait!” I cried.

A whack-ass request which I then turned down—gee, that sure felt familiar. It was that same uncomfortable sensation from the time in junior high when everyone had started to shun me.

You can't tell a person no when they invite you to do something.

I felt like the ground was about to give way under my feet as my past trauma resurfaced like an old scar. My mouth moved on autopilot, and I yelled after Satsuki-san.

"Hey, Satsuki-san!"

She stopped in her tracks.

"I-I'd like it if we could still be friends!"

There was a slight tremble in my voice. I mean, good friends like this didn't just grow on trees.

"That was all just, uh. Another one of your usual jokes, right?" I asked, almost like I was clinging to her. I gulped down a mouthful of saliva.

"Satsuki-san…"

I pictured the worst, but I didn't have the luxury of choosing my words carefully. I just asked her straight-out, telling her only what I wanted and nothing more.

***

"Satsuki-san, don't actually go and catch feelings for me, okay?"

Satsuki-san slowly turned around. There was a hint of a smile on her face. "Why, but of course I won't," she said. "You're awfully full of yourself. Don't get too big for your britches, Amaori."

I felt so relieved, my knees just about buckled. “Right, duh!” My face lit up. “I should have known. I mean, you have no interest in stuff like love or crushes. Or like, you know, girlfriends and dating and marriage and making a future together, right?”

“Making a future together?”

“Okay, that one’s pushing it a little, but whatever. You get the picture.”

I picked up my lunch box and binder case from my desk and fell in step next to Satsuki-san on her way out the classroom door. Perhaps out of relief, or maybe from a sense of guilt for rebuffing her, I blabbered, “Anyway, that’s a mean joke to make, Satsuki-san! You legit had me going for a minute there. I’ll let it slide this time, but some things are off limits, even to your very best friend in the whole wide world who you care about so much. Got it?”

Satsuki-san sighed in a way that made her sound like she was done with me. “Yes, yes,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Good, it seemed like she was finally back to her usual self. Phew! Now, *this* was what I’d wanted.

And then, almost as if she wanted to live up to my expectations, she spat vitriol at me. “Don’t worry. I promise that there are only two people in the entire history of the universe who could ever develop feelings for you. In the past and future both.”

Hey, wait a sec, this vitriol was a little too strong!

“I wouldn’t mind a *few* more,” I said. But even so, I couldn’t deny that I was already way luckier than I had any right to be with two certain someones having fallen for me.

After Satsuki-san and I went our separate ways, I went up the

stairs in a thump-thump, thump-thump rhythm. When I reached the metal door at the end of the hall and turned the knob, it opened easily for me.

The sky was one sprawling stretch of blue, the kind of clear autumn day that got my tummy rumbling like in that old wives' tale. Two girls and their open lunch boxes sat on a sheet spread out across the rooftop concrete.

They both greeted me with smiles.

"Oh, Rena-chan, there you are!"

"Why hello, Renako. The breeze is lovely today, so it's quite pleasant up here on the roof."

The first was Sena Ajisai-san. Her hair fell in gentle waves, and something about her always seemed as soft as cotton fluff. She had a sweet face and large, bright eyes. If you were to stand her all neat and innocuous under a sign which read, "Everyone's Best Girl," literally the entire human race would agree and begin chanting her name in unison. Ajisai-san was super kind, the sort of girl who everyone would adore if she were a love interest in a story. But she also had the strength to be a protagonist in her own right, and I admired her as a person. More than that, actually—I worshiped her at this point. Ajisai-san was an angel.

Then there was the other girl sitting there next to Ajisai-san: Oduka Mai. As evidenced by her clearly natural blonde hair, she was a quarter French. She gave off a radiant inner light, a golden glimmer that could just about outshine the sun. I figured it was that aura thing people talked about. She was a top-of-the-line model and was as dignified and graceful in manner and deportment as a princess. Without a doubt, she was also the most popular girl in all of Ashigaya High. We nicknamed her the Supadari. There was no one else on her level, not when the mere chance to have a conversation with her was enough to make anyone

happy.

And so…

"S-sorry," I said. "I guess I ran a little late." I laughed awkwardly. Satsuki-san had held me up, but I wasn't about to tell them that.

I took a seat in between the two in the space they'd left for me. I unsteadily unwrapped my lunch, feeling oddly self-conscious and elated, just like the day I first put on my junior high uniform.

"It's kinda nice to have lunch with you guys like this," I said, reflexively.

Ajisai-san and Mai exchanged glances and then both giggled a little spontaneously.

"Yeah, I guess because Satsuki-chan and Kaho-chan went somewhere else today, huh?" said Ajisai-san.

"They did," said Mai. "What a rare chance for us three to have some alone time. I believe this is our first time meeting in a group of three at school, but it is quite a lovely thing to do, isn't it?"

"For sure," Ajisai-san replied.

So I had—actually, *we* had—a secret. The kind of secret we couldn't tell anyone, the kind of secret other people would consider immoral. See, Mai had asked me out, and then Ajisai-san had followed suit. I couldn't possibly choose one over the other! So, uh. I didn't. And now all three of us were dating one another.

***

My girlfriend Ajisai-san turned to Mai and said, "Oh yeah, Mai-chan, did everything turn out okay for you? I know a bunch of people overheard us and started all those…you know. Those rumors about us

and stuff."

Oh, good point! After I'd asked her out in such a conspicuous fashion, she probably went trending on social media. Maybe Mai was going to be hounded by talk show paparazzi until she suffered a mental and physical breakdown from the invasion of privacy!

"More or less, I suppose," *my girlfriend* Mai said as she picked up her phone. "But there's little enough of the gossip that it can be ignored. Had the commentary been solely on the fact that I am dating a woman, then perhaps the response would have been a bit more sensational. But that isn't the whole story, no?"

"I guess, when you put it that way."

"Mm-hmm. It simply sounds too odd for Oduka Mai to be dating two girls at once, so the news hasn't gone far. I suppose people think it was some sort of bizarre performance. In that sense, perhaps I should be grateful for Renako's decision to ask me out there…"

Then *my girlfriend* Mai looked at me, and her eyes widened. "Is something the matter, Renako?"

"Huh?" I said.

"Ooh," *my girlfriend* Ajisai-san said. "Your face is bright red."

"Huh? Uh, hey."

She put her hand to my forehead. I tensed up all over at the touch of her cool, soft palm.

"I-I'm okay," I said. "I'm not running a temp or anything. I'm fine. I'm so fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Y-yup! I'm doing just peachy!"

I waved away her look of concern. Oh god. If I got too conscious of the brutal reality, pretty soon I'd wind up unable to carry on a

conversation with them. Were these two really *my girlfriends*? Or was this all a dream? I felt like I was full to bursting with helium gas, but I vowed to put in serious effort and be a proper participant in the present conversation.

"Th-that's good to hear, Mai," I said. "If you lost work or something because of rumors about me, I'd have no choice but to grovel on the floor in apology in front of your mom."

"You needn't let it worry you, Renako. My decisions are my responsibility. Even if I were to suffer a setback if someone found out about our relationship, I promise I would never regret my decision to ask you out."

Ajisai-san nodded and smiled. "Me neither, Rena-chan. I mean, I don't have all the responsibilities that Mai does… But I still feel the same way. I'll never regret my decision to be with you."

"Oh, Mai and Ajisai-san…"

These two were so sweet that I almost teared up involuntarily. My sorry soul instinctively tried to run away, screaming, "Come on, I'm not good enough to be with them! Here, one sec—let me call up a hypnotist to erase all my memories." But I put a hand on my chest and suppressed the feeling. No, no, no. I'd already made up my mind, hadn't I? Now wasn't the time to go whining about my insecurities. I had to keep trying to be positive for the sake of both these girls who'd fallen for me. And I had to use everything in my power to keep their promises to never regret it. After all, I'd sworn to try my best, right?

"Okay!" I said and snapped on a smile. Both Mai and Ajisai-san looked startled.

"What is the matter, Renako?" Mai asked.

"Just shooed away all the bad thoughts!" I said. "I'm now the reborn Neo-Renako. I'm focused on what's ahead and never looking

back. The emissary of courage and love!"

"You really don't have to go that far…" my fallen angel said, wasting no time before attempting to shake Neo-Renako's resolve. "Don't push yourself too hard, okay, Rena-chan? You can try your best at your own pace, you know."

If Ajisai-san says so, why not? I thought. *Why not let Ajisai-san be nice to me?*

Yes, I was tempted to immediately go back on my decision, but no. I had this.

"And with that said," I went on, "I'd like you to review the following documents."

I took two bundles of paper from my binder case and handed one each to Mai and Ajisai-san. Both took them and read aloud in monotone, "The Girlfriend Project Business Proposal."

Ajisai-san looked at me like she'd just read some nonsense. "What is this…?"

I adjusted my nonexistent glasses and straightened up. Believe me, I'd prepared plenty for this moment. I'd watched tons of videos of presentations and stuff so I could deliver my speech with ease.

In real business lady tones, I said, "I've labored these past several days on producing this document, as I would like for us all to come to an agreement on various matters in order for me to date you both. Presently, I would like to propose that we institute a quarterly girlfriend contract, viz. a contract to be renewed in three months' time."

"A girlfriend contract," Mai repeated.

"Viz and…whadda what in three months…?" Ajisai-san asked.

I nodded. "That's correct," I said. "Please see page three for reference. The girlfriend contract was agreed upon by mutual consensus

of all parties at the recent Makuhari Messe conference. Of course, either Mai (henceforth referred to as Party A) and Ajisai-san (henceforth referred to as Party B) may terminate the contract at any time and for any reason. However, barring those circumstances, I would like to direct your attention back to the matter of the contract renewal."

Party A and Party B exchanged glances.

I (henceforth referred to as Party C) decided to assume they were following along so far and continued my explanation.

"Upon renewal, Parties A and B will be asked to rate their experiences in the project on this evaluation sheet."

"You don't need to keep calling me Party B…"

"I see," said Party A. "Grading the project on a scale from 0 to 100, no? So you are asking us to rate you, essentially. And in quite a few categories, it seems."

"Yes, there are twenty," said Party C.

There were five grades possible, like on a report card. The categories ranged from things to do with my personality, like sincerity and kindness, to things involved with being a good girlfriend, like how much the other parties enjoyed our dates. I wanted to cover as many bases as I could think of.

"Earlier, I pledged to you that I would try my best," I went on, "but I failed to provide any specific and measurable criteria for doing so. This sheet is therefore designed to help us visualize the degree of my effort."

Anyone could say they'd do their best, but that didn't mean anything. Well, I guess if you lived your life on the straight and narrow, just saying that would still be pretty credible. But Party C lived on the twists and turns, so I knew better than anyone that you couldn't trust me as far as you could throw me. Still, now that Party C had decided to

do her best—or rather, given that if Party C failed to do so, she'd utterly loathe herself—she had no choice but to actually follow through. The thing is, however, you can work yourself to the bone, but so long as you're doing it for yourself, like, "See how hard Party C's working? That means you should think good things about her!" then it's all just a bunch of self-centered, self-indulgent nonsense.

I would do my best, not skip on school, and on top of all that make Mai and Ajisai-san happy to be my girlfriend. That's what "actions speak louder than words" means, aka the correct way to try your best.

So with all that being said:

"If, at the end of the three-month period, Party C fails to score above a 90 on your evaluation, the contract renewal will be shelved until further notice," I (or Party C, rather) said with grave seriousness. I awaited my audience's cheering and applause.

It didn't come. If anything, the audience looked positively indifferent. Hello?

"R-Rena-chan," Party B began, but Party A lightly put a hand out to stop her.

"Renako," she said.

"Y-yeah? Oh, you can call me Party C, actually…"

"All right," she said. "I'd be happy to do your evaluation."

"Hey, Mai-chan," Party B protested.

For some reason, Party B glared at both of us in annoyance. I'd hardly ever seen Party Bjisai with a look like that on her face—it freaked me out so bad I almost dropped my act altogether.

But Party A only smiled. "What's the harm in it?" she asked. "Renako is asking us for feedback on the results of her hard work. As with grades on a test, having an evaluation of her performance in a

visible format is sure to be a good motivator, no? I think it's a fascinating idea."

"Sure, I guess," Ajisai-san said. "But that's not what I was going to bring up."

"No, I understand, Ajisai." Party A turned to Party C and continued, "But I think it best if you do not set a pass or fail mark."

"Huh?" I said, instinctively looking back at her. I panicked. "M-might I ask why? It's to ensure client satisfaction! That's why I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into the Girlfriend Project Business Proposal!"

"Yes, we can tell just how hard you're working for us," Mai said.

"So…" I rapidly lost all confidence in the face of Mai's smile. "What, are you saying there's no way I can hit a 90…?"

"I mean the opposite, Renako."

"Huh?" I looked up. Hesitantly, I asked, "What do you mean, the opposite? That I get a perfect score just by being here…?"

"Exactly."

Ah, right, ri—wait, what? Just then, I returned to my senses.

"No," I cried. "Look, I can't just accept that right off the bat! You're too quick to be nice to me, after all, and my self-esteem isn't high enough for this yet."

"Do we need to give you another push?" Mai said. "Ajisai, would you do the honors?"

"Sure," said Ajisai-san. "Hey, you know what, Rena-chan?"

They were attacking me in waves!

Ajisai-san folded her hands across her chest and hit me with the puppy-dog eye treatment. Eep. It felt like she'd wrapped me up in her soft, downy wings in the blink of an eye.

“Mai and I asked you out because of who you are, Rena-chan. We both said that we wanted to date you, remember?” she said.

Oh no. Just that preface alone warned me that I was going to be an emotional wreck by the time she was done talking. As far as predictions of the future went, this one was sure to come true.

“So you see,” she went on, “the most important thing of all is that you’re *you*. That fact alone gives you full credit…actually, no. That’s not something that can be scored at all.”

“Ugh,” I whimpered. “I get full credit just for being myself… Ajisai-san, you big softie…” I blubbered some more, clutching my head in mental agony.

It was bizarre. My heart was just about to be purified and everything. I could have sworn I was on the right path into the light, but was I really marching back into the darkness once more? Like, in the first place, I didn’t want to base everything on what other people thought of me, but now I was trying to rely solely on Mai and Ajisai-san’s opinions again. That was the last thing I’d wanted to do, and yet here I was trying to do it again!

“I don’t want to keep being like this…” I said. “If I really am always allowed to try becoming a new me…then I want to end up someone like Mai or Ajisai-san!”

I stretched my hands out to the sun as if I were crawling up out of a bottomless swamp.

Mai and Ajisai-san gently took my hands into theirs.

“It’s okay, Rena-chan,” Ajisai-san said. “This made me happy, because I could tell how seriously you think about us. How could I not be happy about that?”

“She’s right, Renako,” Mai added. “You know, we have no desire to try and push you too hard. It’s perfectly all right to go at your own

pace. You don't have to compare yourself to anyone. I want you to take care of yourself before worrying about anyone else. Then, on top of that, we would be pleased if you prioritized us too."

These two were so kind in every way.

"Ajisai-saaan, Maiii," I sobbed.

Their kindness soaked deep into my heart, washing away the black ink that stained it.

"I'm amazed that you came up with all of this on your own, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said. "You're so cool. You really don't let anything stop you."

"But you needn't strain yourself all alone," Mai said. "These rules affect all three of us, so let's decide them together. After all, I am quite excited about this too. The life I've dreamed of is waiting for me just around the corner."

"Uh-huh," Ajisai-san said. "No doing it alone, Renako. See, I've been thinking too—about trying this or doing that. You can't go and steal all the fun."

She grinned adorably, and Mai beamed too. My heart wept as they held my hands.

"You're so sweet…" I said. "You guys are both so sweet…"

Wow. Girlfriends. These two wonderful people were my girlfriends. The responsibility involved seemed so heavy it would squash me flat, but I didn't want to get squished. Because I mean… I mean… they thought I was special and were so nice to me! I was in heaven!

I'd been reduced to an emotional wreck, but Mai and Ajisai-san comforted me profusely. (Even though all this fuss was my fault in the first place for deciding to two-time them!)

And then lunch was over, with my little episode of stirring up

drama just to get brownie points having resolved it. God. What was I doing with myself? (Like, for real, though.)

As I walked down the hallway alone, a yellow hair ribbon popped up next to me.

"Y'know," said the girl attached to the hair ribbon, "if anyone could two-time Mai and Aa-chan without batting an eye, I would, like, be giving the question of their sanity some serious side-eye. Just sayin'."

"Hey there, Kaho-chan…"

This girl with the know-it-all grin who'd just appeared out of nowhere was Koyanagi Kaho-chan, a pretty girl who was sort of the school's friendly pet cat. Best known for the little fangs peeping past her lips, she was petite and perky, and, due to her bubbly, cutesy personality, we all recognized her as the resident little sister figure of Ashigaya High. Everyone doted on her, no matter which friend group she popped into, so maybe she was less of a pet cat and more of a popular stray cat. In her own words, she and I were pals, but recently we'd discovered the shocking truth that we were also close childhood buddies from way back in elementary school. That had led to a fight and a few headbutts back and forth, but now we were thick as thieves.

By the way, she (like Satsuki-san) had been around when I'd made my two-timing announcement, so she naturally knew all about me dating Mai and Ajisai-san.

"Hey, Kaho-chan, can I say something awful?" I asked.

"Spill it," she said. "But I might whack you with a rock if it's bad enough."

She still smiled away, but her fists were clenched. Yikes.

I smiled wearily. "I'd really rather you didn't… If at all possible, I'd appreciate sympathy or kind encouragement instead…"

“You already hit rock bottom right outta the gate, but now you’re telling me it’s gonna get even worse?” she asked in astonishment.

I slumped so hard my shoulder joints just about disconnected. “Okay, so as it turns out, I’m hella nervous about this after all. I promised I’d try my best, but no matter how hard I try, I just don’t feel like I can be the kind of person they both deserve.”

Yup, no doubt about it—this was how I felt deep down. I hadn’t *lied* back when I said I’d try my best, nor was I now attempting to sweep that decision under the rug. The desire to do my best was a genuine emotion, but so was the fear. The thing is, while I only had the first one equipped right now, the other, hidden emotion was rapidly growing to the point where it was about to burst. And that’s why I wanted to confide in Kaho-chan. Just venting to someone didn’t count as betrayal, right?

And so, in response to my terrible confession, Kaho-chan said, “Huh. Yeah, I getcha.”

That sounded like sympathy to me! Thank god. *Kaho-chan, I love you,* I thought.

“But, like,” she said, “that shoulda been obvious before y’all started dating, y’know?”

“I mean, yeah, but…” Okay, so I got the sympathy but not the encouragement. *That’s fine, thanks anyway,* I thought. Just having a listening ear was good enough for me.

I knew I’d even boasted up on stage with that whole, “Go out with me. I’ll make you happy” thing, but I had zero confidence in myself. It caused me no end of anxiety to think that I’d screwed up even in the way I approached trying my best. Whatever happened to the invincible Neo-Renako? Boo-hoo-hoo! Believe me, I wanted her back more than anyone else. (Boo-hoo-hoo indeed.)

Our destination now came into sight: our classroom, 1-A.

Kaho-chan tilted her head. “Huh? Whazzat?”

Standing in front of the rear door was Hasegawa-san, the girl who always sang my praises like I was some kind of god. Her expression looked uneasy, like the face of someone who had to handle a difficult customer.

When our eyes met, she exclaimed, “Ah! Amaori-san and Koyanagi-san. Um. There’s someone here to see you.”

“Us?” I said. I almost involuntarily made a “whoa” noise in surprise.

In front of Hasegawa-san stood five girls, but they weren’t from our class—I figured they were from Class B next door. When I saw that one of them was a girl I really didn’t like, I backed away without thinking. I bet I was making the same face as Hasegawa: like I had to deal with a customer who’d come in with a laundry list of outrageous complaints.

Kaho-chan was the only one chill enough to raise a hand and go, “What’s poppin’? You guys need somethin’?”

Demonstrating their perfect coordination, all five girls turned to glare at us in unison. Holy smokes.

The girl standing at the front of the pack barked, in tones so ringing I bet you could hear her outside, “Koyanagi-san and Amaori-san, it is a *pleasure* to make your acquaintance!”

“P-pleasure’s all mine…?” I said.

This was Takada Himiko-san. She had long black hair and was really tall—taller than Mai or Satsuki-san even, well over 170 cm. She was the boss of Class B and, according to Kaho-chan, she thought we Quintet girls were her rivals. She even clicked her tongue at me, of all

people, every time we passed in the halls. Freaky, don't you think?

Oh, I guess now's a good time to mention that the Quintet was the name for the friend group of the top five girls in Class 1-A. It included Mai, Ajisai-san, Satsuki-san, Kaho-chan, and some weirdo loser who tagged along at the back of the pack like a fifth wheel with a flat tire.

Anyway, as I dithered on the spot, Kaho-chan let Hasegawa off the hook with a grin. "Thanks! I've got this; you can peace out now."

Hasegawa-san looked at her like a girl in love. "Thank you so much, Koyanagi-san!" Then she zoomed away.

Dang, Kaho-chan was such a girlboss. And she acted like it was nothing.

"Uh, well. Uh," I said. "Is there anything with which we might be able to help you…?"

"I should certainly think so, Amaori-san!"

Eep. I felt like a tiny dog getting barked at by a larger, threatening mutt. The pressure she put on me was intense!

Takada-san placed a hand on her chest and, sounding calmer than before (or perhaps just more full of herself than ever), recited, "Today marks the six-month anniversary of the day we began school in April. We have skirmished many times, and through our rivalry encouraged mutual growth as we shared this high school experience."

"Um, what?" I said.

She said it like it was totally true, but I'd never clashed with Takada-san before. And believe me, I'd done more than my fair share of clashing.

Was Takada-san, unbeknownst to me, good buddies with the Quintet? Were they gabbing around the clock in a Line group chat I hadn't been invited to? Oh no! There went a door to darkness opening

again!

As I fought for dear life to construct a barricade in front of that ominous door, Takada-san continued her speech with the inexorable pace of a tank. “And yet I have come to the realization that it will not do to remain so gleeful and complacent. No more of this nonsense. We ought to settle this matter once and for all! We must impress upon the students of Ashigaya which of us is the superior. The student body will fragment!”

Takada-san snapped her arms open wide like a lizard spreading out its neck frills.

I suppressed my monumental urge to go, “Oh, okay. In that case, lemme just…” and then skedaddle out of there like that same lizard would. After all, if I ran away, I’d leave Kaho-chan here all on her own. And besides, I was the one who Takada-san had addressed first anyway.

“Uh, you want us to s-settle this once and for all…?” I repeated.

“Indeed!” Takada-san’s eyes glittered. Eeep. “You, the Quintet! We, the 5déesses! We shall compete to see which of us is fit to reign supreme over Ashigaya High School’s first-year class, and *that* is what I mean by settling this once and for all!”

Ignoring the whole reign supreme over yadda yadda yadda for a sec… “You are…the what now?” I asked.

“The 5déesses!”

I shot Kaho-chan, the walking encyclopedia, a look begging for an explanation. But just then, the girl behind Takada-san answered for me.

“Well, Amaori-chan, 5déesses is a combination of ‘déesse,’ the French word for goddess, and the Japanese word for five, ‘go,’ to describe us as five actual goddesses. You see?”

“O-okay…”

I was really not sure about a girl I'd never met before adding a "chan" to my name. For some reason, the way she talked kind of reminded me of Ajisai-san, but the vibe was all different because she sorta came on too strong.

The girl giggled. "So even just from our names, we goddesses outrank you queens. Right, Himi-chan?"

"Indeed," Takada-san replied. "Alas for you, such is how this cruel world sees us. I suppose one could say the competition is over and done with, but I shall still be kind enough to grant you an opportunity to face us directly."

"Wooow," Kaho-chan jeered with zero emotion whatsoever, resting her chin on her folded hands. "That is sooo nice of you. So, what's this opportunity, huh?"

"The most ideal opportunity, truly. The perfect setting to determine the winning class, a festival of sporting—" Here Takada-san threw an arm up diagonally, as if she were Romeo addressing Juliet on the balcony, "—the inter-class athletics competition!"

Next to me, Kaho-chan muttered, "Yup, figures."

"Wait, you're saying we'll decide which of us is better by seeing who wins the competition?" I asked.

"Indeed," said Takada-san. "For it is perfectly fair, will lead to no complications further down the line, and, above all, will let the entire grade know which of us is the victor. Correct?"

Um.

Just then, I felt someone come up next to me, a sparkling radiance in human form.

"Why, I see. That sounds entertaining," the radiance said. It was Oduka Mai: the queen of the Quintet!

Someone in Class B went, “Oh my god.” Yeah, I couldn’t have said it better myself. I’d felt like we were the away team up until a moment ago, but Mai’s mere presence was enough to banish that feeling in a jiffy. I felt like a newbie shooter in an FPS being carried by my friend who ranked top of the leaderboards.

Takada-san fixed Mai with a serious expression. “Why hello, Oduka Mai-san,” she said. “Does this mean you accept my challenge?”

“If I were only speaking for myself, I would be happy to take you on as much as you like. However…” Mai smiled wryly.

There were two others standing next to her. “I refuse. It sounds like far too much bother.”

“I had a feeling you would say that, Satsuki,” said Mai.

“I just feel like I don’t really need to know which of us is better than the other,” said the second girl.

“I see. Thank you, Ajisai.”

Now that Satsuki-san and Ajisai-san were here, we had the whole Quintet assembled in front of Class A. With all five present, the visual appeal, as you can imagine, was completely off the charts. I may not have known a lot about Takada-san’s gang, but to my bystander’s eye, the 5déesses stood no chance of beating the Quintet (even if you took me out of the equation and made it five versus four).

“And there you have it,” Mai said. “I apologize, Takada-san, but as you can see, we are quite a pacifistic bunch and much too kind to fight. Isn’t that so, Renako?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” As the bystander suddenly brought into the spotlight, I nodded fervently. “I-I’m not really confident I’d do all that hot in a competition or anything. Sorry about that.”

The first girl to clap back, just moments later, was the one who’d

spoken up earlier and reminded me of Ajisai-san. “Come on, Sena Ajisai. I know you’re acting like the school popularity contest means nothing to you, but you’re still reaping all the benefits of being in the Quintet, you know.”

“Huh? Is that really how I come across, Suzuran-san?” Ajisai-san asked.

“How could I see it as anything else? You’re always so full of yourself!” The girl called Suzuran-san jabbed a finger at Ajisai-san in a way that set my alarm bells ringing.

Then one girl from Class B after another began to join in on the rain of taunting.

A girl with long bangs sighed listlessly. “I understand how you feel,” she said, picking on Satsuki-san, “about this being far too much of a bother. Why not surrender now, then? If you have no dog in this fight, surely it doesn’t matter who wins or loses.”

“Because to begin with, I don’t have any desire to spend *a single second* of my time on something this trivial.”

“I see. That’s perfectly understandable too. No one wishes to compete in something they already know they’ll lose.”

Refusing to dignify that with a verbal response, Satsuki-san turned to look out the window as if this was the height of boredom.

A petite girl hopped to the front of the pack and smirked at Kaho-chan. “Hey, how’s it shakin’, Kaho-rin? Don’tcha wanna throw hands with us?”

“Like, I’m down for whatever,” Kaho-chan said. “But Mai’s the leader of the Quintet, so whatever she says goes.”

“C’mooon, it’ll be fun! C’mon, c’mon, c’mon, c’mon!”

This not particularly eloquent girl shook Kaho-chan back and

forth, and Kaho-chan just let her do it.

It was then that I noticed something. I felt like these girls were all playing copycat, right? I mean those five copying us five. Maybe it was all a complete coincidence, or maybe they were doing it on purpose. But, like, Takada-san was the confident queenly type squaring off against Mai. And the other girls were also really similar to my pals: feminine Ajisai-san, stoic Satsuki-san, childish Kaho-chan… Wait, so did that mean the last girl was like…me?!

Oh god, what was she going to be like? What if she was super timid and so blatantly shy that she couldn't even make eye contact? Wouldn't that mean that's how people saw me? No. I was an extrovert. No matter what anyone said, I was an extrovert! I'd done a flawless job of turning over a new leaf for high school! No one knew the truth! That's why I was 100 percent positive that the last girl would turn out to be completely normal, a total cookie-cutter model of a teenage girl.

And then. The person who came forward…was…an adorable girl with stars in her eyes.

"Hiya, Renako-kun! Y'know, I've always wanted to have a chat with you," she said, then giggled. "I know this is maybe not the best way to meet, but I feel like it's still gotta mean something. Nice to meet you! Call me Terusawa Youko."

"What the heck?!" I cried involuntarily.

"Huh?"

Why the heck had they sent out a sweet, kindly, can't-keep-a-good-girl-down, oldies-shojo-manga-protag-looking girl? She was the exact opposite of me! For crying out loud, people, take a better look at me!

"Oh, Renako-kun, are you not a big believer in fate or fortune telling or that kind of stuff?" she asked. "Okay, that's good to know. I guess I was being a little bit of a try-hard for a minute there. Yikes, this

is embarrassing. But you're so cute that maybe it's better this way, you know?" She giggled again.

"Cut it out!" I roared, not giving a damn what anyone else would think.

"Huh?!"

Miss me with that tugging on people's heartstrings BS! Would it have killed her to at least *try* and act like me? I mean, heck, this girl was the cutest out of everyone in Takada-san's group, to boot. Sure, we all have our own preferences, but she and I were about the same height, and her bobbed haircut was so well styled it shone.

"Anyway," she went on, "I was really hoping we could work up a good sweat together and be buddies. Hope it works out! And good luck to us both at the competition."

"G-go easy on me please…" I said.

She came at me so hard and grabbed my hand with such vigor that I leaned back as far as I could go and looked away.

Nope. Having a peppy extrovert come at me with that level of intensity was freaky. Some real freaky stuff, I'm telling you. I mean, I was an extrovert too, but it's a matter of degree! Like all living beings, staring at someone so much more overwhelmingly brilliant than me was blinding.

I was in such distress that Mai seemed to notice. "Unless it's unanimously agreed upon, I'm afraid we won't be competing with you as a group," she said.

Oh, shoot, sorry. I'd made her turn someone down again! I could feel my inner darkness swallowing me up once more!

Takada-san glared at Satsuki-san and me in particular and then made a prideful "hmmph" noise. "Very well," she said. "Lunch is just

about over, so we will be on our way. But this is not a surrender. We will find you a reason to fight, I promise."

Takada-san turned to go, and the rest of the girls made their various parting shots before the entire group retreated.

"See you later, Renako-kun!" called Terusawa-san.

"R-right, see you…" I called back with a wave. I really would have preferred to *not* see her later, but…I guess that was out of the question.

I went back to class along with the rest of the Quintet and sighed quietly. No doubt about it, this was all because hanging around Mai gave my high school experience more perks than I could count. People thought I was better than they were and paid me their respects. Girls loitering together in front of the bathrooms would immediately smile and step aside with an, "Oops, sorry, Amaori-san!" the moment they saw me. People no longer hogged all the seats and refused to make space for me, and both boys and girls alike were on the whole friendly when they talked to me. Given my dark past in junior high, it couldn't be overstated how grateful I was for that. It was like having a cheat-level blessing. Sometimes guys would ask me to go hang out or girls would get jealous of my social status and click their tongues at me, but even then, the only reason I took critical damage was because I was an ex-introverted loser with subpar people skills. In theory, the upsides outweighed the few downsides. And considering how many upsides there were, it just made sense that I paid the tax for all these blessings.

That was how I rationalized this incident too. However…

Like a small typhoon growing in strength, this small controversy would eventually balloon into a huge stinking event that ate up all my emotions. For me, who'd just barely dipped my toes into the dating pool (and with pretty girls who were far out of my league!—and two of them

at once!), it took everything I had just to get through the day. Worrying about these other concerns of my high school experience was totally out of the picture.

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Group Chat Name: 5déesses (4)
Part 1

Queen: And thus we've finally declared war.

Star Lily: Great job, Himi-chan!

Queen: There is no going back now… Mwa ha ha ha…

Queen: I feel nauseous.

miki: Miki miki!

miki: Mikimiki! Miki!

Queen: What is the matter, Miki-san?

Queen: Has an evil witch laid a spell on your tongue, rendering you incapable of speech?

Star Lily: Idk. It's just this thing she's been doing lately.

miki: Miki miki!

Queen: Hush!

Queen: Ugh, whatever! Anyway, in order to reign supreme over Ashigaya High,

Queen: we must do whatever it takes to make them agree to this showdown! Even if we must resort to drastic measures!

Star Lily: Like what?

Queen: Like.

Queen: Well.

Queen: I will come up with that later!

Star Lily: Coolio.

miki: Miki miki!

Queen: What is it now?

Star Lily: Sounds to me like she's got a great idea up her sleeve.

Queen: I do hope you aren't just saying that.

Queen: I shudder to think what she might come up with. Please don't tell me it's something like digging a pit for them to fall into.

miki: So, like, we could call one of 'em to meet us out back behind the school building, trap her there, and start a fight. Or we could like keep picking on 'em over and over in little ways until they get hella mad at us. Or how about we take something they care about and break it?

Queen: Huh?

Star Lily: Huh?

Chapter 1:
This Was Doomed from the Start! There Was No Freaking Way I Could Do My Best!

Social interactions are like a game where you have to pick the so-called "right answer" over and over. For instance, let's say your friend makes a joke. The right answer might be to laugh, to hit them with a follow-up joke of your own, let it fall flat if the joke's corny, etc. It depends on what's happening at the time, the whole vibe of the situation, and the kind of dynamic you guys have. It's possible that if you laugh your head off at a really stupid joke, everyone around you will just look at you like, "What's that person's problem?" and your public opinion will groundrocket (you know, like the opposite of skyrocket). Frankly, it's tough as hell.

At school, you're constantly having those choices thrust in front of you. When your friend starts complaining about something, how do you respond? Do you sympathize? Commiserate? Try to cheer them up? Console them? What are the pros and cons of choosing each?

The vast majority of people persons are like, "Can't you just tell?" What is that? Mind reading? Some kind of magic? Nah, it's all just kinda picking up on vibes. You know, reading the room—that whole thing. It's like how weather forecasters can figure out what the weather'll be tomorrow based on the cloud movements and the humidity fluctuations and whatnot. Someone who's a people person can use the slightest changes in others' facial expressions, vocal tones, and reactions to always (and instantaneously!) lead them to the right answer. If that's not magic, what is? It's totally out of the question for me. Even if I work my butt off and get to one correct answer, I could never keep up with

the speed of questions barreling in like on a buzz-in game show. Like, guys. I just can't. It'd fry my brain's CPU. That's what made me escape to the roof back on that fateful day.

Okay, this is already raising the difficulty level way too high, but let's move on from talking about ordinary interactions. If there are ordinary interactions, does that imply that there are some that aren't so ordinary? Yup, sure thing.

Those would be the *extraordinary* interactions. There were no clear right answers for dating as a group of three the way I'd decided on. We had to pause every step of the way and consult together like, "Okay, so do you guys wanna call this the right answer?" "Sure, sounds good to me." It was an adventure to fill in the blank spots on the map. And I was basically going in blindfolded, fumbling and groping my way through everything without any of this room-reading business to serve as a clue. Any time I decided that something was a sure thing, I ran the risk of stepping on a land mine. No two ways about it, this was hard mode. And there was no freaking way I could pull it off!

And yet, and yet! Since I'd made my decision, I gathered up all my dreams and set off in search of my holy grail: the One Piece! Mind you, I did get kinda burnt out and overwhelmed for a hot sec, but…this was how I rolled for the most part.

Now would begin my first trial as a girlfriend. Just because I couldn't read a room to save my life didn't necessarily mean I couldn't cut it in an extraordinary interaction. No one knows what the future holds and all. And I wasn't the kind of gal who read the walkthrough—I just charged right into the game!

"Wait a minute," I said. "Relationships aren't games, though!"

I lay in bed at the crack of dawn, face-planted into my pillow, still

in my PJs, and my phone gripped in one hand. The light streaming in through my curtains was refreshingly bright, proving that it was most definitely morning.

Ugggggggh.

"I mean, in games, all you have to do is pick your choice," I said. "In real life, I don't have the ability to make *this* choice… Not anymore…"

I was currently up against one of the rules of having a girlfriend. Earlier, I had surveyed Mai and Ajisai on what sort of things they wanted me to do. Of course, being as this was my first deed as their girlfriend, I asked them to make the request as easy to fulfill as possible… Anyway, they both told me what they wanted in no uncertain terms.

At the moment, it was fulfilling Ajisai-san's request that had me agonizing in bed. Well, no—the agonizing bit wasn't part of her request. That was something I'd chosen to do myself.

Oh hell, it was already the time we'd agreed on. If I dawdled any longer, Ajisai-san would be disappointed in me. Then she'd be like, "Y'know, I don't…think this whole dating thing's going to work out after all. But let's be friends again in our next life, okay?"

Feeling like I was about to use my one and only elixir in a game, I pressed the call button on my phone. *Hyah!*

Ugh, my chest ached. Since I'd started high school, the only times I'd pressed this button (well, except to speak to my family, that is) had been a handful of calls to Mai and Kaho-chan. Texting was anxiety-inducing enough, so for me to call Ajisai-san… Man, dating was hard!

My brain started spewing out shrieking noises in an attempt to distract me from reality. The phone rang for a while and then… connected.

The other end was silent for a moment. Wait, uh. She did… actually pick up, right?

"Uh, hi…?" I said in the same tone of voice as a student who needs to fess up that they didn't do their homework.

I heard a rustling of clothing on the other end of the line. Then, after another period of silence, she mumbled, "Hello…?"

She was mumbling! Mumbling Ajisai-san!

My mouth opened and closed like a fish. I ransacked my mental closet of appropriate things to say from top to bottom several times over and then decided to give her an exceedingly standard greeting. "H-hi."

I heard what sounded like an amused little girl giggling. Wait, was that Ajisai-san just now?

"Hi, Rena-chan," she said.

Oh god! Oh no. Ajisai-san's sleepy voice performed a direct assault on my eardrums, and it was about to do me in. Heck, it was doing me in already. I'd never be able to handle this, not once for as long as I lived.

"Um," I said. "Uh. I'm calling, um, just like you requested."

"Uh-huh…" she said, then giggled. "This is kinda nerve-racking."

"Y-yeah, you're telling me. It's crazy nerve-racking."

Ajisai-san had requested that I give her a wake-up call on the weekends. Weekday mornings were a war zone for Ajisai-san, since she had to help her brothers get ready for school, so the recoil from that made her pretty lazy on the weekends. Thus, she was having me place a wake-up call at 8 a.m. That sounded like something even I could do, or so I'd thought at the time. But it turned out to be a close thing. I'd yet to conquer the introvert's kryptonite: the telephone.

But all the same, I did it! I achieved my goal of waking up Ajisai-san!

“So, I guess that’s that, Ajisai-san,” I said. “Have a great day today!”

“Uh-huh, thanks. Oh, and—”

And that was when I hung up.

Wait, was Ajisai-san starting to say something after I disconnected? The realization hit me with a shiver. Hold the phone. Calling her in the morning was basically just me being her alarm clock…right?

I directed the question into thin air, but my answer came in the form of my phone ringing.

“Whoa!” I cried. That startled me. It was, of course, from Ajisai-san.

“H-hello…?” I said.

“Hey, it’s me… Sorry, Rena-chan. Are you busy?”

“Oh, no, not at all. Not in the slightest,” I answered quickly. Maybe I’d come across sounding too easygoing.

“Well, in that case,” she said. “Um…I was just kinda…hoping I could hear the sound of your voice a little more… Do you mind?”

“I-I don’t mind a bit!” It felt like she was a little kid tugging on my sleeve, pleading with me. I shook my head fervently. “S-sorry. Did I do something wrong, or…?”

“Oh, no, it’s not you. I’m sorry for asking you such a selfish request.”

“No, not at all,” I said. “Besides…your voice is really cute right after you wake up and all.”

“Y-you think…?”

“Y-yeah.”

Once again, we lapsed into silence. But it was funny. I didn't feel as scared of the silence as I had on my last call with her, even though I sucked at carrying on conversations that had no particular purpose.

"You know, the conversation we had over our trip during summer break has been on my mind lately," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Back then, I wasn't really sure if I *like* liked you or not… I'm pretty sure I thought of you as a friend."

"Y-yeah…?"

"But even then, having you right next to me when I woke up felt, well, super nice. That's why I was so glad to hear you right after I woke up this morning too."

"O-oh."

My ears burned. This was the kind of conversation I absolutely could *not* have over speakerphone, on the off chance that my family would hear it.

I pulled my blanket up over my head, which made me feel like I was in my own little world with Ajisai-san here in bed. Her undeniable affection for me made my head go blank. But even with my head in a fog, I still searched for the right words to say. After all, I was Ajisai-san's.

"Me too," I said. "I'm really lucky to get to talk to you first thing in the morning."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "It's not a bother for you?"

"No, I like it. It makes me feel like I'm your oneechan again."

"My oneechan?" she repeated.

"Uh, yeah."

Whoops. The tone of her voice would have been yikes-worthy

enough in person, but having it whispered into my ears like this made it a whole other kind of yikes. It was a deep swamp of yikesness.

"But you aren't my oneechan at the moment, now are you?" she asked. She sounded almost like she was pouting, which made my pulse race.

Eep. I mean, I knew that of course. But…

"Y-yeah, that's true," I said.

"Uh-huh. So what are you, hmm?"

She was trying to make me say it!

"I'm. You know."

"No, I don't know."

God, she was really trying to make me say it no matter what!

"Come ooon," she said. "What are youuu?"

Little by little, she sounded like she was getting more ticked off by the moment.

I covered myself in the blanket, lowered my voice even further to the point where even God couldn't hear me, and dutifully recited, "I'm your…girlfriend."

Ajisai-san was silent for a moment and then went, "Mm-hmm." I'd never heard her sound so happy before.

Ugh! I was beyond mortified, but if it made her happy, then it was fine! Wait, that wasn't the point I wanted to make. Ajisai-san and I were dating, after all. Didn't that mean we had equal power? So that meant it wouldn't hurt for me to say selfish things too, right? *Mwa ha ha.* Now it was my turn to embarrass Ajisai-san to death.

"Hey, Ajisai-san, I want to hear you say it too," I said. "Ajisai-san, you're my whaaat?"

“Sure thing,” she replied. “I’m your girlfriend.”

I couldn’t respond. I felt like I’d been parried and lay wide open for a counterattack.

“I’m your girlfriend, Rena-chan,” she said before giggling to herself.

“Oh. Um.”

“That’s me! Sena Ajisai, Amaori Renako’s girlfriend.”

She didn’t need to keep repeating it! At this rate, she was going to do me in, which would be a good way to die. (Right?)

“How can you say that so calmly?” I demanded.

She giggled again. “That’s ’cause I *am* calm.”

Even if Ajisai-san was actually hiding her face in her pillow from embarrassment and kicking her legs in the air, I would have had no way of knowing. Now that I thought about it, I had the feeling Ajisai-san could lie to me for ages, and I’d never be able to tell.

I forcibly switched the topic. “Oh hey, that hot spring trip sure was a blast, huh?” I said. If nothing else, I couldn’t let this end without making Ajisai-san’s bashfulness show itself. “I never imagined Mai would walk in and catch us pretending to be sisters, huh? What a mess that was! Boy, that sure was embarrassing, huh?”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “I was super startled.”

How could she respond so casually?! Was it because she knew all my weaknesses?

“I-I’d always be happy to be your oneechan again if the opportunity ever arises. Just say the word. Okay? Okay?”

“Hmm,” she said. “But I dunno. I mean, now you can dote on me plenty as my girlfriend.”

No! It wasn’t an either/or thing!

Without thinking, I screamed at the top of my lungs, *"Look, you can still be girlfriends even when you're sisters!"* I'd cranked the volume of my voice up so ridiculously loud that my voice accidentally came out as a shout.

"Whoa," Ajisai-san said.

"S-sorry!"

"N-no, it's okay," she said. "It's just, um…" This sounded like the lead up to her saying something awful. "Rena-chan, are you, like…into that kind of thing…?"

"I most certainly am not!" I insisted.

It was just that—oh, how do I say it?—out of all the many cute sides of Ajisai-san, that side of her was particularly adorable. Look, for the socially awkward, when you have a single good experience, you keep ruminating on it for ages until it's sucked dry. Like, you think, "Oh boy, it sure was fun to play that game with my friend. Yeah, sure was a blast playing together. Wow, I'd sure love to play that again, because that was great," over and over again, and then when the remake comes out years later and you try again and you don't find it's as engaging as you remembered, you're like, "Oh, I guess it wasn't the game that was so good. It was spending time with my friend," and you weep thinking that those happy days will never return. That's how things work when you're socially awkward. Not that I fit that description, mind you!

“I mean, if you really want to, we can do that again sometime,” Ajisai-san said. “I guess.”

“Yay!” I fist-pumped out of reflex—not just because of the sister thing, but because I’d finally gotten her sounding embarrassed. I mean, being wide awake and talking about something you did half-asleep is no doubt mortifying. But I guess you had to play fair when you were dating.

As I rejoiced, Ajisai-san whispered, “Rena-chan, do you have a thing for little girls?”

“No!”

“Like Kaho-chan?”

“Nuh-uh!”

I refuted the accusation with every fiber of my being. I needed to clear up this misunderstanding! If I didn’t, I had a feeling it’d get entirely blown out of proportion to the point where there’d be no coming back from it.

I laid it out in clear terms. “I’m not into little girls,” I said. “I just love situations where 158 cm, 15-year-old Ajisai-san sometimes goes back to her true self, acts all shy, pretends to be a little girl, and asks me to dote on her as her oneechan!”

“Ah,” she said.

I wasn’t sure how this happened, but I felt like laying it out in clear terms only made things worse!

After I got off the phone with Ajisai-san, I somehow managed to lethargically crawl out of bed. I did it. I completed my duties as a girlfriend. That was a perfect ten out of ten right there! Trial one, complete!

I still had something I'd promised I'd do with Mai on Monday, two days from now, but that had sounded easier, relatively speaking, when she'd told me what she wanted. That's because I knew what the right answer for it was. Well, I say that, but I still ended up turning it into a huge kerfuffle anyway…

I sighed. I still wasn't sure if I could fulfill all of my duties as a girlfriend, but I just had to try exactly as hard as I felt unsure. *That's how life works, Amaori Renako,* I reminded myself.

You know, I'd been feeling warm all morning. I decided to take a quick shower.

And just as I left my bedroom, I bumped into my sister.

"Oh, Oneechan," she said.

"Oh, hey," I said.

My sister—Amaori Haruna—was two years my junior. She was in her second year of junior high, and yet she was already a teensy bit taller than me. Haruna spent her youth devoting herself to her club (badminton), and I guess she'd made a name for herself as a local athlete. It went without saying that she was athletic, but she was also attractive and, above all else, had the ability and the guts to say what she meant with zero fear whatsoever. She was a people person, hands down. *Come on, don't leave poor ol' sis here in the dust,* I thought. *If we start dividing up our family into who's got what it takes and who doesn't, it'll make me ditch school again.*

We fought sometimes, and she drove me bananas other times, but I've heard that's how it is with all families. I thought we got along all right, considering we had completely different interests.

But what was she doing outside my room? Was she just passing by? Or was she coming to me with a grievance?

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Was I being too loud?"

“Nah, not really,” she said. “You’re way louder when you’re up all night gaming and talking to yourself.”

“I am so sorry.”

I thought she’d given up on saying stuff like that these days…

As I apologized, my sister turned her face away but otherwise didn’t move from the spot.

“Hmm?” I said. “What is it?” What was this all about?

“Nothing.”

Well, she clearly had something she wanted to say.

“Who were you talking to on the phone?” she asked.

“Uh, Ajisai-san.”

“Hmm.”

There was a weird sort of tension. It was like the moment before a race when you’re crouching and waiting for the signal, but you don’t know when it’ll go off.

“By the way,” my sister said, “what ever happened with you and Mai-senpai?”

“Huh?!”

I pressed both hands to my chest. What did she mean, what ever happened? Was she talking about…the you-know-what? The time when Mai tried to come on to me and my sister chewed me out? Was she… asking what happened afterward? Why was she bringing it up now?!

“Wh-wh-wh-why do you ask?” I said.

“’Cause.” My sister wasted no time laying it all out. “I never heard about anything after that, and it’d be kind of weird for me to ask Mai-senpai for the deets. You got really depressed all of a sudden, so I thought maybe you guys had broken up. Then you randomly perked

back up again."

"U-uh, true, I guess."

True enough, I supposed my recent behavior really did look hella sus from my sister's perspective. Not to mention all the selfie training or the voice exercises I'd been doing to prep for my performance in the cosplay event…

"Even if she dumped you, which is reasonable enough," my sister said, "I figured that wouldn't explain all of it."

"'Reasonable enough'?" I repeated. But I got what she meant.

I folded my arms automatically. It'd be easy enough to tell her, "Mai and I started going out," but my sister was in contact with Ajisai-san. So if she let slip to Ajisai-san something like, "Hey, did you know that my sister is going out with Mai-senpai?" it'd be totally possible that Ajisai-san would then grin and go, "Yeah, and she's dating me too. Me and Mai-chan are both getting two-timed." And then I'd end up with my sister chewing me out over my relationships. I could see it now. She'd be like, "Oneechan, as you are the disgrace of the Amaori household, it is my duty as your family member to execute you." And then she'd drive a butcher knife through my heart.

Yeah, that wasn't my idea of a good time. Never mind a good time—that'd straight-up be the end of my life. Even if she didn't kill me, she'd at least give me the death glare every time she saw me, right up until I eventually grew up and moved out. Yeeeeah, I wasn't a fan of that idea.

If that were to happen, I'd have no choice but to grovel before her with Mai and Ajisai-san in tow, like the samurai guy on *Mito Koumon* with his retainers Suke-san and Kaku-san, and plead, "If you hurt me or make me miserable, these two will suffer for it! So please, be nice to me!" And I did *not* want that!

Choosing my words with extreme care and precision, I addressed my sister and said, “Um. Mai and I had. Uh. It’s a long story!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked. I was trying to obscure the truth, but it was like she had my heart caught in her grip and refused to let go. “You guys are dating, right? You went to her fashion show and met her mom, didn’t you? So let me guess. You haven’t made any more progress past that, have you?”

“W-well…”

Oh no. With my conversational skills, there was no freaking way I could sneak this past my sis. I decided to play my last card.

“Wh-whatever, who cares?” I said. “Why should I have to tell my kid sister? It’s embarrassing, so I’m not gonna talk about it!”

The card I’d just played, An Older Sister’s Iron Fist, could force any conversation to an end! And thus, with the playing field destroyed, my sister had no choice but to retreat in dejectio—

“Um, excuse me?” she said. “After all the help I’ve given you, where do you get off telling me that? It’s not like this is none of my business.”

“I mean, true, but still!”

Oh no! Given that I’d used my sister’s help to turn over a new leaf for high school, all the perks of my new high school experience only lent her power. *What are you, my biggest shareholder?*

Was my only choice to do her in before she could end me? Would I be forced to rip out my sister’s heart? If I was going to die either way, then I had no choice but to take her down first… Mwa ha ha, yes, I had to!

Just before that dangerous thought took over my mind, my sister finally released my heart from her clutches. She sighed. “Oh, whatever, I

get it. If you really don't wanna talk, I'm not going to pry."

"Good!"

As I cheered, she gave me the stink eye. "I can totally tell you're hiding some funny business, though."

"Cut it out," I said. "That's a totally unfounded accusation. Where's your proof, huh? I demand to see proof!"

"Who died and made you a lawyer…?"

"Whatever, I'm leaving! This court is adjourned!"

I dashed away, and she didn't follow. Thank god.

I went back to my room, grabbed a change of clothes, and set off for the bathroom. I was in the middle of a shower—aka stark naked and completely vulnerable—when my sister chose to launch her next attack.

"So, Oneechan," she said from across the frosted glass.

That scared the living daylights out of me. What on earth was it going to be this time?

"What is this," I snapped, "some back alley?"

"You have a *thing* for little sisters, don't you?"

Aha! So that's why she was in front of my room earlier!

"What, were you eavesdropping on my phone call with Ajisai-san?" I demanded.

"No, that's the first I've heard of this."

Wait. Did she also know about the time when Ajisai-san and I had roleplayed as siblings…? Who had told her? These were top confidential state secrets, people!

"Okay, but who wouldn't?" I said. "To big sisters, little sisters are so cute you can't help it."

"E-excuse me?"

I lobbed the same ball I'd bowled at Ajisai-san in order to get a spare. "I mean, big sisters would hear out any selfish request from their little sister. Because it's cute, you know? I don't have a *thing* for sisters, but it's only a matter of course since I'm a big sister myself!"

I emphasized Ajisai-san's cuteness with everything in my power. "If you had a little sister, you'd understand too. You feel this sort of illogical love, like you want to protect them from every misfortune. That's what having a little sister is all about!"

My shout echoed around the bathroom.

My sister was silent for several moments and then muttered to herself, "…Freak."

Look, you can only say that because you've never seen five-year-old Ajisai-san, okay? You just don't have any love in your heart, but I'll have you know, you bleepity-bleep…!

Man. I was exhausted, and it was still barely morning.

Once I was done with my shower, I decided to go on honeymoon with my PS4 in order to recharge my MP. Time to spend the day in Four-kun's tender, loving embrace, heh heh heh.

After I'd spent a while mooching around, I heard the doorbell ring. My sister had gone off to her club activities today like the workaholic she was, so there was no one but me home at the moment. Welp. It was a major pain in the ass, but I got up.

I picked up the intercom. I hoped it wasn't someone selling something…

It wasn't.

"Is this Amaori Renako's residence?" I heard.

I scrambled to the front door and yanked it open. "Satsuki-san?!" I

cried.

"Hello, Amaori," she said.

There, dressed in her very best, stood an extraordinarily gorgeous raven-haired beauty.

Satsuki-san was in my room…

I sat stiffly across from her at my table. What was she doing here? Our FPS competition with Mai was over and done with ages ago. The rare event of having a pretty girl in my room was making me wig out. No matter how many times it happened, I didn't think I'd ever get accustomed to it.

She was silent. I was silent. Oh, the silence, the horrible silence! Props to Satsuki-san for that. Neither Ajisai-san nor my sister's silent treatment powers could hold a candle to hers. (Silent treatment power is a measurement of how much pressure one exudes by virtue of being silent. As a matter of fact, Kaho-chan's silent treatment power was pretty high.)

I couldn't take it any longer. With the same sort of feeling as when you pull your head out of the water when washing your face, I spoke up. "Uh, Satsuki-san… What brings you here today?"

"Nothing much," she said. "I simply had some free time before my shift."

"What, and did plate tectonics suddenly put my house in between yours and the donut shop?"

"Of course not," she said. "Nevertheless, I am here."

Satsuki-san was being kind of evasive, even though normally she went in swinging with all the military might of the mystic sword Muramasa. Was this, like…the fluffy uwu Satsuki-san here today or

something? Had she ended up at my house in an “Oopsy-doopsy, looks like I caught the wrong train!” maneuver? And if that was true, did that mean I didn’t have to be quite as formal with her all the time?

Then uwu Satsuki-san’s lips gently parted and said… “Well, have you kissed Sena yet?”

“Bwuh!”

She was just as sharp as ever! And she was coming at me quick from point-blank range. What was she, a master swordsman?

“Why’re you asking?!” I demanded.

“It just occurred to me that we once kissed in this room too, that’s all.”

“Seriously? You bring this up like it’s casual small talk?”

As I looked at this rather too unrestrained Satsuki-san, it occurred to me that maybe this idea of a right answer in terms of social interactions maybe wasn’t such a real thing after all.

Urgh. I wriggled bashfully and laced my fingers together across my chest. “Not…yet…”

“I see.”

“What, were you just asking out of curiosity?”

“Why not? There isn’t anything particularly interesting about kissing,” Satsuki-san said. “It makes no difference to me whether you’ve kissed anyone or not.”

“You say that, but you totally flipped out when we had our first kiss.”

“I no longer recall that.” She smiled, looking horribly composed. “That’s all in the past.”

If you only listened to what she said, she sounded like a mature older girl with lots of experience, but…that *had* only been her first

kiss…

However, she soon retracted her smile. There was a bit of gloom in the look she leveled at me. “I came by today to offer you an apology.”

“M-me?” I said.

“Indeed.”

In spite of myself, I felt uneasy. Had she done something nasty to me that I didn’t even know about?

“Y-you didn’t tell Ajisai-san that we’ve kissed before, right?!”

“No,” she said. “That would be awful, don’t you think?”

“Hm?” I said. “Yeah, I mean, I guess…?”

I think it’d be pretty shocking to find out that your two friends kissed, right? But what do I know?

“Let’s suppose you heard that Mai and Kaho kissed,” Satsuki-san went on. “What would you think?”

What *would* I think? “Uh…not much…?” I ventured.

I mean, even if they kissed, I would imagine it’d just been them fooling around or something. Kaho-chan treated Mai pretty casually, after all.

“So I actually think it’d be kind of okay, I guess…?” I said. In the first place, Mai knew Satsuki-san and I had kissed too.

Just as I was about to be swayed to that point of view, Satsuki-san added, “I think it best we do not mention it to Sena.”

“Huh? You sure?”

“Yes. Hence why I am also keeping the fact that I am your ex-girlfriend to myself.”

“God, your word choice!”

Who was my ex-girlfriend?! We only dated for two weeks and then

broke up and went right back to being friends like it was nothing! There were no lingering feelings at this point either!

W-wait a second… I put a hand to my chin. Humbly, I asked, “Satsuki-san, are we exes?”

“Are we not?”

This was about as shocking as if I’d just found out that the planet I’d been born and raised on wasn’t actually Earth. This distinguished and gorgeous girl was my ex…? No way!

“Wait, no, but!” I said. “We were just pretending to date!”

“Isn’t it a bit late to say that now?”

Okay, yeah, we kissed and bathed together and stayed the night together and stuff—but still! It was only so we could make the big reveal to Mai that we were totally dating!

“You’re. My ex? And I’m…your ex?” I asked. “And what would happen if Ajisai-san were to learn all that…?”

I gave Satsuki-san an imploring look, and she averted her eyes. “It would likely trouble her a great deal.”

I could imagine. “Rena-chan, you dated Satsuki-chan?” she would say. “Why on earth would Satsuki-chan date someone like *you*? What kind of nasty hidden trick did you use? Do you…know her weakness or something?”

No! That was way too inaccurate. After all, Ajisai-san was my girlfriend right now, and there was no way she’d ever say so many insulting things to me.

So it’d be more like: “Rena-chan, you dated Satsuki-chan? Wow, I had no idea. Hey, do you still, um…have feelings for her? Yeah, that makes sense. Satsuki-chan’s really great… Well, but you still dated me in spite of all that, huh? Thanks.”

I lifted my head.

“That would be awful, Satsuki-san!”

“Wouldn’t it?”

Fundamentally speaking, I never had a darn clue what Satsuki-san was thinking, but I knew her rivalry with Mai and her simple sweetness toward Ajisai-san were both legit. I could trust her as a fellow worshiper of Sena Ajisai.

“Right,” I said. “I understand. Let’s keep what happened between us strictly off the record.”

“I agree,” Satsuki-san said. “I’ll tell that to Mai later as well. At any rate, let’s return to the topic of conversation at hand.”

“Oh, right.”

Now that she mentioned it, what was this thing she wanted to apologize for?

“It is about the inappropriate message I sent you,” Satsuki-san said.

“Huh?”

What message? Oh, the one where she asked me out?

“Didn’t we get that all squared away in that one empty classroom?” I asked.

“So you may think, but I have a different opinion. Are you not curious as to why I asked such a thing of you in the first place?” she said.

“I mean, yeah. I guess…”

True enough, Satsuki-san wasn’t the type to play mean pranks like that just for the heck of it…

Right? Actually, I suddenly didn’t feel too confident about that. At

any rate, it seemed to me like she often jumped the gun about things only to regret it later. Maybe this was simply another example of that. Satsuki-san was a lot rasher than you'd think to look at her.

"As I'd done you that disservice, I felt I owed you a proper explanation," she said.

"You're pretty hard on yourself, huh?" I said. "That's really impressive."

"Don't worry. I'm just as hard on everyone else."

"Can't argue with that!"

Satsuki-san demanded a mentality of strict self-control from everyone else too. Anyone who couldn't, she considered scum. Truly, she was something else.

"Uh…so, why'd you send me that message?" I asked.

Bluntly, she said, "I don't want to tell you."

"Um, hello?" I spluttered back on reflex.

But Satsuki-san remained perfectly grave. "My answer is that I do not want to tell you why I sent you that message. And that is all I will say on the matter."

"But you just said you owed me a proper explanation."

"Yes, and didn't I just give you one?" she asked.

"Huh?! You call that a proper explanation?"

Satsuki-san smiled and shrugged in relief. "That was because I had accidentally lied to you. Now I've finally gotten this off my chest."

I hadn't even noticed her lying to me either. God, I really had no idea where Satsuki-san drew the line on what was okay and what wasn't.

But oh well. What the hey.

“Okay…” I said. “All right. Fine.”

If Satsuki-san had decided that she wasn’t talking, there was no point in me trying to ask her. Besides, she already looked relieved enough at the moment, so maybe it was better to leave things as they were. She’d probably only done that to try and steal me away from Mai or something anyway. Then she had probably realized that doing so would upset Ajisai-san too and hurriedly took it back, or some other ineffable reason like that. Satsuki-san had this issue where she got tunnel vision whenever it came to Mai.

Satsuki-san glanced at her watch.

“Well, we’re done talking now,” she said. “What next?”

“Oh, do you still have time before you need to get going?” I asked.

“Some. What, would you like a kiss?”

“Could you please stop messing with me like that?” I protested. “I have girlfriends now, so we can’t do that anymore! We’re just exes, remember?”

“When you call us exes, it suddenly makes kissing sound all the more probable.”

“God, I know, right? Wait, no it doesn’t!”

I’d totally agreed with her and then immediately changed my mind. I was flip-flopping so hard it almost made me dizzy.

“Take your messed-up ideas about love and get them under control already,” I said. “Here, since you don’t come over all that often, let’s play a game. Yeah.”

“A game?” Satsuki-san repeated.

I smiled at her like I was opening my jacket to sell her a pirated DVD. “You gave Mai her console back after our match, so you must be starving for some good game time, aren’t you?” I snickered. “You missed

Four-kun, didn't you?"

"Not particularly," she said.

"How on earth?! You don't get the shakes when you can't play games all day long?"

"Not at all. I only played in order to win our competition," she said. "But very well. We can play now."

Satsuki-san sat down next to me, just like that day way back when. She accepted a PS4 controller from me and flashed me a smile that made my heart skip a beat.

"Gaming is something I could live without, but if you are so insistent, I suppose I'd be willing to play with you."

"L-lucky me," I said.

That smile of hers, like every one of her smiles, was the sort that could capture your heart if you weren't careful enough. Satsuki-san smelled so good whenever she came near… (And I knew what that scent was too!) She was just too beautiful. I wouldn't say it out loud, but I would always gladly welcome her whenever she deigned to keep me company!

"What game do you want to play?" I asked.

"Will any game work? Let me see. How about this one?"

The game she chose was a zombie shooter that you could play two-player.

"Oh, that's…" I began.

That was the game I'd played with Mai and Ajisai-san. For some reason, I felt a bizarre sense of guilt over lowly me playing it with girl after girl.

Eh, but who cared? Playing games with a pal never got old.

"Yeah, let's do it!" I said. "On the bright side, the controls are

pretty much the same as in that one FPS you played."

Yeah, there really was a perk to playing games together, something almost ritualistic about it—a ritual to show that we were back on good terms as friends again. After all, I didn't want things to be so awkward between us anymore!

However, the moment we started playing, there was a shocking revelation.

"Satsuki-san," I said, "do you not remember *any* of the controls?"

"I forget everything that doesn't hold any interest for me," she replied.

"Oh my god."

I thought she'd really enjoyed herself, but nope. Turned out it was all just to have a chance at facing off against Mai all along. This girl had *used* my beloved Four-kun! Done him dirty!

I gunned down one spawning zombie after another, nursing an odd feeling of rage.

***

After my sister had wounded my heart and Satsuki-san had taken me on an emotional roller coaster, Four-kun somehow managed to heal all my ills…

Lord only knew how, but I managed to get enough MP back to go to school by the Monday in question. Yup. The first trial of having a girlfriend, but part two. It just sounded bad.

I fidgeted as I sat at the dining table.

"Oh, you're up early, Renako," my mom said.

“Y-yeah, I guess.” Normally I’d only just be rolling out of bed right around now, but here I was, up and all ready to go. Not to mention that I’d also clearly put more effort into my appearance today, with my makeup and hair and all.

My mom gave me some buttered toast. “Are you meeting up with someone?” she asked.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“That’s nice.”

I really had no idea what sort of face I was supposed to be making, sitting here like this. I just stared at the corner as I munched my way through my toast. My mom probably thought I was going to meet a boyfriend or something. Fortunately, she didn’t pry, but as that didn’t give me the opportunity to plead my case, the best defense inevitably came to be silence. If nothing else, I wanted to be out of the house before my sister came in to the dining room.

My phone buzzed just as I finished gulping the last of the toast down.

“Oh, uh,” I said. “I’d better get going.”

“Mm-hmm. Have a good day,” said my mom.

I put my plate in the sink and grabbed my bag. My mom gave me a patronizing smile like she understood everything completely, which, honestly, was super embarrassing.

As I changed my shoes in the entranceway, I heard my sister’s voice calling “Good morning!” from the living room. That was a close one. I got out of there right in the nick of time. If she’d asked me, “What, did you have your sexual awakening?” right then, even if she didn’t mean it in a bad way, I’d straight-up run away on the first train tomorrow to a hot spring inn.

I opened the door. It was clear this morning, but it was supposed to rain later. There in front of my house, a limousine was idling, and waiting for me beside it was a girl with a charming grin. Her blonde hair swayed in the autumn breeze like a field of golden pampas grass.

“Why, hello, Renako,” she said.

“H-hey,” I said.

I most certainly did not want my mom or my sister grilling me as to why I was gussied up all nice today, and the reason for that was—well, they’d probably get the answer right in one.

“Thank you for humoring me and coming with me today,” Mai said.

“Oh no, not at all. Honestly, my thought was that asking me to join you on the way to school was so modest that I wasn’t sure if it was really you I was talking to.”

“Do you really think so?” she asked. “Then perhaps I should have been a bit braver.”

“Nope, this is just fine.”

To match with Ajisai-san’s request for a wake-up call, Mai had asked me to let her pick me up in the morning so we could go to school together. That felt pretty doable to me too, which was how I wound up sitting next to her in the back seat of the limo.

The car glided through the streets on the twenty-minutes-ish trip to school. It was so calm and pleasant that I found it unusual to look out the window and watch the scenery stream by.

“I feel like it’s been ages since we’ve done this,” I said.

“Indeed,” said Mai. “The last time you rode with me in the limousine was when we went to the ryoutei, no?”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. I was talking about us just relaxing together.”

“Ah… I see.” Mai looked down with a slightly shy expression. “Yes, you make a good point. I’m afraid I was keeping my distance from you slightly for a while…”

“But we’re good now, right?”

“Of course. I’m quite happy about that.”

I glanced over at Mai as she sat next to me. She always looked show-stopping, reigning supreme as a top model. She didn’t have the level of eagerness some girls our age did, the kind who go, “I’m going to look fab today!” but she had the sort of beauty built up from talent, a good background, and assiduous daily effort. Mind you, I didn’t really know what kind of stuff Mai did on a daily basis, but I knew she gave her work a hundred percent, so I figured it must be pretty tough.

“Hey, Mai,” I said. “If you ever feel like you want to talk to me or take a breather, you can always reach out. Even if it’s just for a few moments.”

Mai paused for a moment. “I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, never mind. I was just thinking that I’ve never actually put that into words, you know? And, um, I figured it’d be kinda nice if it could give your happiness meter a little boost, right?”

Mai giggled. “You say that even though I am always calling you with no consideration as to whether it’s a good time for you to take a call.”

“Y-yeah, but still. Look, I’m saying it’s okay to call me. You can call even if you don’t have anything to say, if it’ll make you happy.”

“I am beyond grateful for your careful consideration.”

Socially awkward introverts were marked by their feelings of

shame and conviction that they're troubling everyone around them, but Mai called that "careful consideration"… Well, if that's how she viewed it, then so be it.

Just then, something hit me. "Hey, Mai. How come you're avoiding looking at me today?"

"Am I?" she said. "I don't believe I look at you so much on a normal basis."

"Come on!" I insisted. "We've made like zero eye contact all day! I mean, we don't usually do that either—but that's because I'm the one looking away."

"Ah, but the spring cherry blossoms outside are so beautiful I can't take my eyes off of them, you see."

"It's October!"

Now I wanted us to look at each other, no matter what that took, so I tapped her knee. I was usually awful at giving or receiving casual touches, but for some reason, I was A-okay with doing that to Mai. Maybe it was the same general principle as to why the three of spades beats the joker in Tycoon.

"Hey, Mai," I said. "Mai. Mai, Mai, Maimaimaiamaimaimai."

I pestered her like a little kid talking to a relative who'd come over to play with them.

"All right, Renako," Mai sighed and, resigned to her fate, looked at me.

Oh god, those enormous blue eyes of hers filled my vision. I felt so bashful! I hurried to turn away. Nope, I couldn't handle this one bit! We probably hadn't made eye contact for even a full second, but all the same, the image of Mai's eyes was permanently burned into my retinas. That one second was so striking it could have lasted for a full twenty-

four hours.

Mai sighed in wonder. “We really and truly are girlfriends now, aren’t we?”

“Y-yeah. We are,” I said.

“It’s challenging to express how I feel, as I once gave up on any of this ever happening.” Mai beamed. “My heart feels so full right now.”

I didn’t respond. I was still nervous about doing a good job of returning Mai’s feelings. After all, both she and Ajisai-san loved me with all their might, but our relationship would fall apart if I only gave each of them half my love. I needed to ensure I showed them double the affection.

“Hey, Mai!” I announced, animated. I didn’t hesitate before scooting closer to her.

“Wh-what?”

“I know I still may not be the slightest bit reliable, but I’m going to try my best, okay?”

“O-oh? Well, I’m glad to hear that. Just do be sure not to push yourself too hard.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I said. But I needed to do *some* pushing myself—and a fair deal, mind you, not just a little bit. Still, I nodded obediently in front of Mai. “Let’s both do the things we want to do and be happy together!”

“Oh?” she said. “What sort of things do we each want to do?”

“Um.” I averted my eyes as far as humanly possible. “There’s still. Uh. Some stuff you’d like. On your…piece of. Um. Paper that you wrote a while ago. You know. That thingy.”

“Oh.” Mai put her hand to her mouth again and looked away, legs crossed. “But I promised not to do anything that would hurt you

anymore."

"Well, do you want to do those things or not?!"

"I don't think it's such a great idea to divide the world into two categories like that," Mai said. "I value the wide variety of options in the spectrum between yes and no."

Now she was suddenly making arguments for argument's sake the way I always did.

"Mai, Mai, Oduka Mai!" I cried. I rapped at her knee again like I was trying to open a huge, heavy door.

Mai made a pained expression. "Please, I'm embarrassed… You see, I would still like to do all those things… My desires have not changed…nor have my feelings for you."

She looked almost too mortified. The fact that she could show her embarrassment, I thought, was growth in and of itself. Come to think of it, I think Ajisai-san had also mentioned once that the difference between friends and girlfriends were the steamy feelings involved. Or had I only dreamed that? Well, I'd never had any sort of dirty feelings toward girls, not once in my entire life, so Mai was alone here. Still, I got what she meant. I'd read about that sort of thing in manga and stuff before.

"I came up with this for your benefit," I told her.

I pulled my sketchbook out of my bag and flipped through the pages to the words *The Touchy Time System: An Introduction*.

Mai jolted. "Touchy Time, you say…?"

"Uh-huh."

Lifting my mental glasses, I endeavored to explain it to her in a professional manner. It would have been too embarrassing without getting into character, you see.

“To prevent you from going overboard, I propose we allocate certain times for this activity. Thus, both parties can engage in consensual fooling aro—I mean, touching.”

I clamped my mouth shut. I’d almost said “fooling around.” Fooling around implied a certain, well, two-way street nature of it all.

“I see,” said Mai. “You’re a genius. How long will the first session be? Around six hours, I suppose?”

“This isn’t a karaoke free time on a day when you have no other plans!”

Seeing Mai immediately get back into the swing of things made me nervous deep down, but I also felt kind of happy. It reminded me of old times.

I thrust my palm forward and said, “But!” I turned the page in my sketchbook, highlighting the next section. “Whenever you get Touchy Time, you also get an equal amount of Touched Time!”

“Which is…?”

“Where I touch you.”

Mai was shocked. “What?”

Yup, this was my secret plan to prevent Mai from going overboard, a means to teach her, “Don’t do unto others what you don’t want done unto you.” Yes, it was a bit like obedience training a dog…for another first-year high schooler…but who cares?

To be honest, it also had to do with how embarrassed Mai had been when she put her head on my lap that one time. She was like an assassin character, outstripping me by far in offense while having weak defense. So I figured she’d probably get as embarrassed as anyone else if I touched her and stuff, and this would probably help stave her off. And…I also felt like, since we’d gone to some trouble to actually be

girlfriends and everything, it'd be nice if I could do some of the courting for a change… It was a bad idea to say, "Um, I think I'd like to touch you…" Yet, if we set a rule in place first, then I could manage it by sheer force of going, "Welp, guess I have to touch you now! Can't get around it! Rules are rules!"

I mean, not that I particularly wanted to touch her or anything. It was just that rules are rules, you know? Can't get around 'em! Those're the rules!

Anyway, I suggested, "Want to give it a shot while we're here?"

"D-do you mean right now? Not in the car."

"Well, don't do anything that can't be done in a car, then! Here, we'll each get about three minutes before we get to school. Come on."

After I pestered her, Mai finally steeled herself. "All right," she said. "Let's do this."

"Okay. Touchy Time starts now."

I faced Mai and spread my arms slightly. Mai gingerly reached for me in my utterly defenseless state, and she stroked my cheek.

"Mm…" I said. God, this was awkward.

She caressed it with the back of her palm.

"Renako…" she said.

"Y-yeah?"

"I adore you, Renako."

Her hand trailed down to the back of my neck. Uh, I was ready to be fondled, but hearing her whispering sweet nothings to me was completely unexpected…

She pulled me into a hug and buried her face in my chest. I kept my arms outstretched and let her do as she pleased. I mean, that's what the rules said, after all!

“You’re so soft,” she said. “And you smell so good.”

“Gh…”

C-come on, man, this was mortifying! It was likewise mortifying that I was embarrassed by this PDA even though I’d been the one to suggest it, so I bit my lip and bore with it. It’s just that I could feel the overwhelming affection Mai was sending me through her fingertips, and a light sweat began to break out all over my body.

She rubbed my back. She fondled my head. She stroked my cheek. She loved on me like I was a stuffed animal she’d just bought until the three minutes were finally up and she let me go.

I had to catch my breath. “Y-yeah, that’s how it works…”

Thank god I’d suggested three minutes to start. If I’d tried to act tough here in Mai’s touchy-feely rehab and given her ten minutes, I would’ve needed to pop back on home for a shower afterward.

I hurriedly fixed my hair and then glanced up at Mai. “S-so, how was that?”

“Ah, yes… I’m glad I was able to feel your touch for the first time in so long. It was a true joy,” she said.

The sheer intensity of emotion on her face made my chest feel hot. Uggghhh. But at the same time, I couldn’t deny that I was glad. You know, honestly, it felt really good to get affection. It made me realize how fun it’d been, what a luxury it was, to have gotten that time when we argued about whether we’d make better girlfriends or regular friends. I mean, girlfriends weren’t a step up from regular friends, mind you. It’s just that it’s kind of nice to have these physical interactions. Right? Right.

ANYway.

“My turn!” I said.

“Yes, of course,” said Mai. “I would love to return the favor, after all the happiness you granted me.”

“Then without further ado…”

I set the timer for three minutes. Now as for what to do first, uh…

I reached out for Mai’s cheek. I figured something that tame wouldn’t be beyond me. But then she caught my hand.

“Hey, Mai?!” I spluttered.

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“Uh, what’re you doing? Could you let me go?!”

“Pardon? Oh, yes. Right.”

She let my hand go. What was that all about? Wait a minute. Mai looked nervous, like a little kid bracing for an injection.

This couldn’t be what I thought it was, right?

I stroked Mai’s cheek with the back of my hand, and she shivered and made a little noise. Ah… For an instant, I had a flashback to the time I’d touched Kaho-chan’s soft skin in the bath. There was that same level of shame and covert excitement.

Careful not to mess up her hair, I gently petted the back of Mai’s head. She pressed her lips together firmly, doing her best not to make a sound, and remained silent. Mai normally seemed as put-together as a work of fine art, but when she blushed like this, there was a totally human element about her. Eeep. That made me embarrassed in turn for some reason. God, there was no way I could last three whole minutes of this!

But I’d clearly leveled up thanks to the time I spent in the bath with Kaho-chan. With that EXP under my belt, I’d become a stronger person! That’s because (excluding Mai from the list of bathing partners) being naked together in the bath with someone was a horribly *oh-god-*

worthy experience. That meant that now I was as cool as a cucumber… Right, as cool as a cucumber… Okay, not really. But I could handle this somehow!

I hugged her tight, wrapping her head in my arms.

“Mai,” I said.

“M-mmm-hmmm…?”

The invincible Neo-Renako whispered in her ear, “You’re so cute, Mai.”

“N-nonsense,” she protested. She looked like she might start wriggling and making a fuss at any moment.

I grinned at her. “You’re cute, Mai. You’re so cute.”

“No, you’re far more adorable than I…”

“Nah. Right now, you’re super cute.”

And I meant that, right from the heart.

She wrapped her arms around me too and let me sink into her. “You are quite the femme fatale,” she murmured. “Oh, how you toy with my heart.”

I giggled. I figured it’d be fine to get a little carried away, at least for now. No one could see us here in the car. Here in Mai’s arms. It made me feel bashful to have her hugging me, but when I say “her,” I’m not referring to the beautiful, powerful Oduka Mai. Right now, she was just a cute teenage girl like me. It was thrilling to feel like we were connecting even further on an emotional level.

“You really do like me, huh?” I said.

I casually poked Mai’s cheek to remind her that her three minutes of Touched Time were up.

Mai pouted. “Who taught you lines like that?”

“Uh, that’s a me original!”

“Well, *you* really like me too, don’t you?” she demanded.

“I-I mean, yeah, duh! I mean! I do, but like, why do you even have to ask? It’d be horrible of me to suggest Touchy Time if I didn’t even like you!”

“Understood,” Mai said. “That indicates that, instead of being touched in turn, I should pay you in cash to compensate you for the time in which I get to touch you. That would not be a bad deal for other of us.”

“Do you really hate me touching you that much?!”

“How could I hate it? It’s only…that I’m shy…”

“Join the club, buddy!” I retorted. “Now you know how I feel.”

It felt like ages since we’d bickered like this. A grin slid its way onto my cheeks without any input from my brain. I’d liked this girl as a friend, and as it turns out, now that we were dating, I *still* liked her just the same. I mean, well. That meant I didn’t have a good emotional reason to have turned Satsuki-san down, which didn’t quite sit right with me. But people typically don’t go around picking up girlfriends left and right anyway! I know I’d said to hell with being typical, but still! Not happening on my watch.

The car pulled up in front of the school gates. We decided to excuse our joint arrival by saying that Mai had bumped into me on the way and decided to give me a lift. It seemed natural enough.

“Thank you, Hanatori-san,” Mai said to the woman in the driver seat.

Hanatori-san gave Mai a silent bow, and I instinctively flinched.

Wait a sec… We weren’t alone in the car. There was also a

driver…and she just so happened to be the one who loathed me: Hanatori-san!

Well, maybe things weren't as bad as I feared. Hanatori-san seemed to adore Mai, so if she found out that we were dating, maybe she would decide to support our love.

Mai smiled at me. "You know, Hanatori-san usually works from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m."

"You needn't be concerned," Hanatori added, puzzlingly. "I am also given a two-hour break."

"Uh, okay," I said with a nod.

"However," Mai went on, "when I mentioned that I would be going to school with you today, Hanatori-san offered to drive us. I think she's taken quite a shine to you."

"Thank you for accepting my request," Hanatori-san said.

We locked eyes in the rearview mirror. Her gaze was icy, staring at me like I was a pest coming to defile her flowers. Nope, she didn't seem to support our love in the slightest.

I laughed awkwardly. "R-really? Wow, I'm…flattered…"

"Have a nice day, Pest-sam—Amaori-sama," said Hanatori-san.

Wait, she was totally calling me a pest right there.

"Th-thanks…" I said.

Sheesh. Would it kill the universe to give me one regular, rewarding day in what's supposed to be the best years of my life?

***

But unfortunately, who should I bump into in the hallway during

break but Takada Himiko-san, aka Little Miss High Horse.

“Why, if it isn’t Amaori-san,” she said. “You’re wandering around with quite the gloomy expression on your face, aren’t you?”

“Geh!”

“Say, I heard that you and Oduka-san came to school together today,” she went on. “Making your dramatic entrance in a limousine in front of the entire student body is a rather show-stopping choice, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I-I didn’t mean it like that, though,” I protested.

She was just commenting on it, but I felt like I was being majorly attacked. Why’d she always have to come upon me when I was alone?

True, Mai and I getting out of her limo together had caused quite a stir among the other students also getting to school at the same time. They looked at us in envy, and if Ashigaya were some kind of rich girl academy, we probably would have heard cries of “Oh my, Oduka-sama and Amaori-sama have arrived together!” “Why, those two *are* quite close, wouldn’t you say?” “Indeed, the Quintet are all such marvelous friends. One cannot help but admire them.” I was only a koala clinging to Mai’s coattails, mind you, but I still enjoyed being bathed in their admiring gazes along with her. It gave me the drive to fight on for another six months to avoid letting slip that I’d once been a shy loner. But now this! Did I really have to deal with *this* the moment I got a little something good for myself? The tax one had to pay for popularity was far too high.

“Kindly don’t let it go to your head,” Takada-san said.

“Eeep.”

Little Miss High Horse pressed in close as I trembled. “Your Quintet is only temporarily tied with us for the top spot. Furthermore, you’re a posse of lily-livered wimps running away from a fight.”

“W-we’re not running away…”

“Oh? And might you have any evidence to support your rebuttal, Amaori-san?”

She came even closer. This girl was freaking me out!

My mind went totally blank. If you had given me half an hour, I might have been able to come up with something sensible to say, but alas, reality was not so kind. There was no Hyperbolic Time Chamber handy.

“Uh, um, well. Um. I. Well.”

Little Miss High Horse made a face like she was bored with my failure to produce any actual words. “Ha,” she said. “Waiting for your comeuppance, I see. Soon we shall discover who truly reigns supreme over Ashigaya High.”

She laughed at me in contempt and then departed. Thank god. I was too pitiful a foe, so she let me go. If she had dragged me off to some secluded corner of the school and assailed me with insults, my heart would have collapsed in on itself.

God, what was all this about? Takada-san was right up there with Satsuki-san in terms of nastiness, but the two were totally different. Essentially, I think it had to do with the hostility or the lack thereof. I don’t think I was very good at handling that sort of thing.

I staggered back to class. Now that I was out of the hot seat, I was starting to feel sad. God, I really was a wretched piece of work. And here I’d thought that joining the Quintet had made me able to talk normally with scary people. But nope, a direct attack plunged me right back into Loserville. I wish I’d been able to at least let it go or sidestep the issue better or something. Like, you know, I could have been all, “I don’t give a fig who’s the best in our grade” or whatever.

I rewound that moment over and over in my head, searching for things I should have said instead. I knew this kind of thing was pointless, but I just couldn’t bring myself to stop.

I spotted Kaho-chan off on her own when I wobbled into class.

“Kaho-chaaaaaan,” I groaned.

“Hm? What’s up, buttercup?” she asked.

I slouched over to her and hugged her around the middle.

“Aww, what’s wrong?” she said. “C’mon, there, there. Tell me what’s happenin’.”

“I wanna be with you for the rest of my life… I’ll never leave you…”

“What the…? Why does this sound like a proposal? Wait, is this legit a proposal? Like, for realsies?”

“Uhh, if you want it to be, sure…”

She karate chopped my forehead. Ow.

“Here you go again, already chasing after other girls. You’re the literal worst.”

“N-no, I’m not…”

This was just how girls interacted, and even though no one had ever said anything to me about me hugging her, I started to feel embarrassed nevertheless. So I straightened up.

Kaho-chan put her hands on her hips and closed one eye. “Hmmph, fine,” she said. “You look like you’re in a real bad way, so I guess I’ll let you spill the beans.”

“You’re my best friend forever, Kaho-chan,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Kaho-chan ended up agreeing to hear me out over lunch. That maybe meant I wouldn’t have to repeat today’s misery over and over in bed that night. Thanks a million, Kaho-chan.

“Oh bee tee dubs, Rena-chin,” she said, “I heard you hitched a ride with Mai-Mai in her limo this morning. I’m *super* jelly.”

“Wait, if even *you’re* mad at me now, I’ll straight-up die!”

The minute your relationship gets better with one person, it get worse with someone else. Talk about a difficult balance.

Oh, I should also mention that Ajisai-san grilled me about coming to school with Mai too. But she just giggled and said, “Gotcha. I see how it is.” The way she laughed made me think she’d figured something out, but she wouldn’t say anything else.

Basically, neither Ajisai-san nor Mai told each other what favors they’d asked of me. Naturally, they were probably curious, but we’d decided to do it like this to prevent any one-upping or arguing about fairness. Mind you, I couldn’t imagine Mai and Ajisai-san arguing with one another to begin with, but that’s a moot point.

“Y-yeah, we happened to bump into each other, and she offered me a ride,” I explained.

“Cool,” she said. “Makes sense to me.”

She beamed, and I forced myself to smile awkwardly and insincerely back. Ugh, this was mortifying!

Kaho-chan laughed. “So you tangled with Little Miss High Horse, huh?”

“Yeah…” I said.

After we’d finished eating with the whole friend group at lunch, Kaho-chan and I stood around talking on a convenient staircase landing. I was a little concerned about leaving the classroom, but I felt okay since Kaho-chan was there with me. As long as I had Kaho-chan around, I could go anywhere. She was my owner, and I was content to nip at her heels.

“That really sucks,” she said. “If I were there, I coulda made you guys get along. Sorry I wasn’t there to protect you.”

I made a whining noise as she scratched me under the chin. I could feel all my mental scars fading away. At the same time, I could also feel every last scrap of my human dignity being flushed down the drain, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. You win some, you lose some. Talk about a difficult balance indeed.

“Why does she hate the Quintet so much?” I asked.

“You get aggressive, ambitious girls like her wherever you go,” Kaho-chan told me. “The way I see it, you gotta have hella self-confidence to legit think you can dethrone Mai.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

Since Kaho-chan poked her head in with friend groups all around the school, she was the Quintet’s informant. If this were a game, she’d probably be the NPC who told you how all the love interests felt about you.

“Sucks for her, though,” she said, “’cause she’s got like a one-in-100,000,000 chance of winning.”

Forget a one-in-a-million chance, yeesh!

“I don’t know anything about the kids in Class B,” I said. “Are any of them popular?”

“I guess there’s some pretty popular girls, yeah,” she said. “Good-looking. Loud. Strong-willed.”

Bluh. Those were the type of girls I was weak against.

For some reason I couldn’t fathom, when Kaho-chan saw me frown, she gave me a sort of delighted-looking grin.

“You don’t even like *hearing* me talk shit, do ya?” she asked.

Yeah… That was fair. Hearing bad things about someone I knew

like Mai or Satsuki-san dealt double damage, but even hearing bad stuff about total strangers made me upset. I mean, I'm not saying this because I'm some saint or something, obviously. It's more that whenever I heard someone shit-talking other people, it always made me reflect on myself. Whenever someone was like, "Man, so-and-so can't read the room to save their life," it inevitably made me focus on my own ability (or lack thereof) to read a room. Whenever I happened to hear someone say, "Look at that bozo thinking they're a hotshot," I remembered that my test scores weren't all that great either and vowed to not get too big for my britches. You know, stuff like that. I'd chastise myself.

So I wasn't cool with it. Even if they were talking about someone who wasn't actually there, I still felt like I was being criticized. That wasn't the same thing as being a good person, I'm sure. If anything, it was more like being ridiculously self-centered.

"'Kay, 'kay," Kaho-chan said. "I'll try my hardest to make it sound like I'm not talking shit. But god, the 5déesses don't make that easy."

While being considerate to me, she then introduced me to each of the members. Takada Himiko-san was their leader. She was tall, gorgeous, athletic, and to top it all off, had rich parents.

"Plus, she's super-duper smart," Kaho-chan said. "Believe it or not, ever since she got here, she's never dropped below the top three in the class ranking!"

"Whoa!" I said automatically. "That's, wow… That's pretty impressive."

Top three, she said. Top three!

Kaho-chan nodded. "And our girls in the top two are always competing with each other and paying, like, zero attention to anyone else. Which is why she's like that. And I mean, I get it. But, like, that's no excuse to go bothering people, y'know? That's a whole other story,

Rena-chin!”

“Oh, right.”

I was about to sink into the swamp of sympathy for Takada-san when Kaho-chan jerked me right back out of it again by the arm. Yeah, she made a good point. Just because you were frustrated didn’t mean you could go and take your anger out on other people.

“So about the other guys,” Kaho-chan went on. “There’s Kamesaki Chiduru-chan, the one who’s totally copycatting Saa-chan. Then Haga Suzuran-chan’s the one copycatting Aa-chan, and the one who’s copycatting me is Nemoto Miki-chan.”

“Can you really explain it with such a rough summary?” I asked.

I was super shocked. I mean, I thought they were copycatting us too, but for this to be something that everyone knew?

Kaho-chan went on to talk more about those three. Kamesaki-san was on the library committee and Haga-san was a part of the student council. Nemoto-san was some kind of mystery peppy girl. A woman of intrigue, if you will.

“And that’s that!” Kaho-chan said. She made a face like she was all done. But that latter half of her explanation was pretty slapdash…

“Uh, what about Terusawa-san?” I asked. You know, the girl copycatting me…actually, not at all, but you know what I mean! The cute, peppy girl who wasn’t copycatting me in the slightest, Terusawa-san.

“Hmm?” Kaho-chan said. “Oh, her?”

She was just about to talk when someone leaped out at us.

“Oh, there you are!” this person cried. “Amaori-san, Koyanagi-san, there’s huge trouble!”

It was Hirano-san, our fangirl.

“Ooh, what’s goin’ on?” Kaho-chan asked.

“Oh my god, Koyanagi-san from the Quintet is so close to me!” Hirano-san gushed. “You’re so terrifyingly, awesomely adorable! Wait, no, that’s not what I meant.”

She shook her head as if to clear away some nasty thoughts and then said, “The students from Class B have taken Satsuki-san away!”

Wait, they took Satsuki-san?!

Kaho-chan and I ran.

Hirano-san told us that she’d been on her way to the bathroom where she saw Satsuki-san tangling with the Class B girls in the hallway. Sensing that something was up, Hirano-san hid and watched as the three girls took Satsuki-san back behind the school building. Considering the recent declaration of war, she’d decided to let the Quintet know and thus set out to find us.

“I hope Satsuki-san’s okay,” I said.

“This is Saa-chan we’re talking about,” said Kaho-chan. “She’s prolly fine.”

“Yeah, probably.”

But I was still worried in spite of Kaho-chan’s reassurance. No matter how mature Satsuki-san acted, she really was just a teenage girl in her first year of high school like the rest of us. I didn’t think she could get ganged up on by three kids her age without batting an eyelid. I mean, I couldn’t even handle one kid my age without ending up on the verge of tears. Even Satsuki-san had to be feeling pretty hopeless right about now.

To be honest with you, I was really freaking scared of standing up to those girls…but! Even if my hands were trembling! Even if I really

wanted to nope it out of here all the way home, forget everything that ever happened, and go straight to bed! I couldn't just leave her there. Lord only knew what Satsuki-san thought about me, but *I* at least considered Satsuki-san to be a very precious friend!

Just like they said on the weather report, the sky this afternoon was filled with thick, heavy clouds. It looked like it was about to rain at any minute, and we ran down the covered outside hallway back to the area behind the school buildings. We turned the corner and there…we saw…a sobbing girl.

I instinctively began to call Satsuki-san's name, but then it hit me…

Wait a second.

"Oh, hello, Amaori and Kaho," said Satsuki-san. "What's the matter? Can it not wait?"

"Oh," I said. "No…"

Let me try to set the scene. Satsuki-san was backed up against the wall of the building as if the others had trapped her there, while three other girls—the 5déesses minus Takada-san and Terusawa-san—stood in front of her. One of them was blubbering, while the other two on either side of her looked at Satsuki-san like she was a bear they'd run into on a snowy mountain. What the heck was going on?

"Saa-chan mopped the floor with 'em…" Kaho-chan said.

Was that what happened?!

One of the girls trying to comfort her friend shouted, teary-eyed too, "H-how could you say such terrible things? I don't believe you!"

"Terrible, you say?" Satsuki-san leveled her gloomy gaze at them, making all the girls immediately stiffen. Eep. I got caught in the crossfire, and it made me shiver too. "You dare stand there and call me

‘terrible’ after you dragged me all the way back here and subjected me to your monotonous blithering? Your shamelessness knows no bounds.”

“Y-you’re so full of yourself, using such big words!”

“Oh? I was attempting to use the most cretin-friendly language at my disposal, but it appears that my efforts were in vain. You must be far more sophomoric than I could have ever fathomed. It begs the question how you ever managed to score high enough to enroll at Ashigaya; considering your distinct lack of intellect, it must have taken quite the effort.”

“C-come on, compete with us…to see who’s better!” Haga-san whined.

Satsuki-san looked her way. Haga-san blatantly flipped out as Satsuki-san locked on to her.

“Very well,” she said. “Shall we compete, then?”

“Huh?”

“Let us compete here and now, and once this is over, you are to never bother me again for as long as we both shall live. I care little about what we compete with. Well, you suggested this yourself. So what’s it going to be?”

“W-wait, hold on,” Haga-san said.

Satsuki-san immediately moved in closer. Haga-san squeaked and stepped back just as much as Satsuki-san moved forward.

“Why, I seem to recall your bunch saying that running away makes one a coward,” Satsuki-san said. “Or am I wrong?”

I felt like I was watching a witch torment some poor village girl. Honestly, what on earth had I been worried about? There was no way Satsuki-san would lose a 3v1. Who’d these girls think they were going up against? *The* Koto Satsuki, that’s who.

“We’ll get you…next time!” the girls said, and then having delivered that old-school parting line, they stampeded away.

I watched them go for a few moments before snapping back to my senses and dashing up to Satsuki-san. Right. Satsuki-san was a real show-off, so even if she acted like she was totally unaffected, she could actually be really hurt deep down.

“Are you okay, Satsuki-san?” I asked. “You’re not, like, hurt or anything anywhere, are you?”

“I’m fine.” Satsuki-san flicked her hair with all the nonchalance of someone out for her early afternoon coffee break. She really was acting like nothing had even happened, huh? “I suppose I would have felt a bit threatened had they pulled a gun on me, but they didn’t. These are only three teenage girls, you know. They’re nothing to write home about.”

“Uh, you’re a teenage girl too?!”

“One must ignore one’s own shortcomings if one wishes to seize the mental advantage over their opponents. Then one is obliged to target each of their weaker rivals and obliterate them one by one. That’s all there is to it.”

Well, easy for her to say. But she had a point. In FPS games, the first thing you wanted to do when you were at a numerical disadvantage was to put every effort into thinning the ranks of your enemies. In theory, at any rate. Whether or not you could actually pull that off was another matter.

Satsuki-san turned around to face us. “Were you worried? Did you both come to help me?”

“Huh?” I said. “I mean, yeah. Kinda…”

That had been the plan, but…

Kaho-chan grinned casually. “Yup, but looks like you didn’t need

the help, huh?"

"I think not," Satsuki-san said, bluntly. "But thank you."

"S-sure thing." I was kinda happy we could talk so naturally like this. In a sense, I was glad we'd come running to her rescue.

Kaho-chan lifted her pointer finger and grinned. "Welp, guess the Class B kids've learned their lesson, huh? Now that they've been split in half by the long blade of the Quintet's shock corps, they'll think twice before messing with us for a while!"

Even I, a pessimist at heart, felt the same.

We immediately put the news of this whole affair in the Quintet group chat, and once that debriefing was complete, I figured that the situation was over.

But things were only getting started.

***

"Sounds like you guys had it pretty rough yesterday," Ajisai-san said to me over lunch. Her soothing voice was like the water of a hot spring seeping into my soul.

Today had been pretty peaceful, and I figured it'd stay that way for a while. No more of life's hardships or sadness for me, just smooth sailing for the rest of high school. All one needs in life, really.

And as a part of that, I was presently sitting in the classroom chatting with Ajisai-san.

"Yeah," I said, "but I'm kinda glad they chose to target Satsuki-san out of all of us."

If they'd gone after me instead, I'd probably have burst into tears within a few seconds. But then would Kaho-chan and Satsuki-san have

come to my rescue? I'd feel like I would owe them for life if that had happened. I'd become their gofer.

Kaho-chan said the other girls had gone after Satsuki-san because she tended to go off and do her own thing a lot of the time. That was certainly true, but I also felt like Satsuki-san was the number one worst person in the Quintet to go picking a fight with. You know what I mean?

"Hey, what would you have done if they'd gone after you?" I asked.

"Me?" Ajisai-san stared off into space, like she was following a cloud with her eyes, and then cocked her head to one side. "I guess I'd want to try talking it out with them first. I'd have the time for it if it was during lunch, so I'd ask them why they were doing this and stuff."

"What if they weren't willing to talk…?"

"Hmm. I think I'd still be patient and try to hear them out. I mean, we're not talking about total strangers here. These are our classmates."

I imagined a ring of girls surrounding Ajisai-san with hostility. It was kind of a depressing thought.

"B-but I feel like that's sorta dangerous…" I pointed out.

"Don't worry, it's fine," she said. "I ran into this kind of thing all the time back in junior high."

That took me aback. "You did?!"

"Yeah. I mediated in a number of fights back then."

Okay, I couldn't imagine that at all. Ajisai-san, a mediator? What on earth did she mean?

"Hey, in junior high…were you, like…you know?"

"Hmm?"

Did Ajisai-san used to be…a wild child?! For a split second, I imagined Ajisai-san with her hair dyed blonde, her natural hair color

already creeping in at the roots. Ajisai-san in a crop-top uniform, miniskirt, big cell phone strap on her bag, leering at the camera: delinquent Ajisai-san. Did that mean she'd sort of turned over a new leaf for high school too? Damn, Ajisai-san…

"Wh-what'd you used to be like back in junior high, Ajisai-san?" I asked.

Taking no notice of my ludicrous vision of her, Ajisai-san giggled. "That's top secret."

So she really was a delinquent?! *Ajisai-san!* Well, everything made so much sense now… Even how close to her family she was—everyone knows delinquents are big on family. And that also explained how she was so optimistic and ready to roll with the punches! *And* why she was so honest and upfront with everyone. It was all because she used to be a bad girl!

"Ah, I think you're picturing something kind of weird," she said.

"I-I am not," I protested.

Ajisai-san giggled. "I was the student council president back in junior high, you see."

"Oh, huh, okay… Wait, you were the president of the student council?!"

That was cream of the junior high crop! Come to think of it, I'd always figured student council presidents were born into their role. And then once a student council president, always a student council president. I'd never considered someone resetting upon entering high school and becoming a regular student.

"Does that startle you?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Y-yeah… But in the sense of, like, now that you say that, it makes total sense."

Ex-student council president-sama… *You were once part of a class of people that were far beyond the likes of me, Ajisai-san…*

"Oh, but this doesn't mean I'm going to start nagging you about school rules or anything," she clarified.

"Y-yeah, I gotcha."

At Ashigaya High, uniform customization was permitted to a certain extent—provided it followed common sense—and so Ajisai-san, too, wore a thin ribbon that wasn't part of the standard uniform. It looked great on her and was really cute, but it also wasn't the kind of thing I'd expect a student council president to wear, not when they took the initiative to follow school rules. That sort of laid-back style was pretty Ajisai-san-ish. Wow. Student council president, huh?

"If you were the president of the student council here," I said, "the whole student body would be huge fans."

They'd even form a fan club for her and stuff. I mean, I'd probably do it myself. And then pretty soon, fights would break out to determine the club's pecking order, and I'd be threatened by some really popular girl who came along after me, whereupon I'd sadly hand over the seat of fan club president to her… It wouldn't take long for me to be driven out of the fan club and end up shutting myself away at home…

Even in my wildest daydreams, there was no hope for me. Enough of that!

Ajisai-san made a teensy heart with her fingers. Aww, cute.

"Would you be my fan too, Rena-chan?" she asked.

"In a heartbeat," I said. "I'd probably match your style and try to make my hair look like yours."

"Aww, really? That's so cute," she said. "You should totally do that."

She put her hands together across her chest and beamed at me. *You're the cute one, Ajisai-san,* I thought. But me cosplaying Ajisai-san… I felt like I'd just see myself in the mirror, return to my senses, and immediately want to die. It was a crime for Amaori Renako to try and convince herself that she was Sena Ajisai.

Just then, Mai came over to us.

"You look like you're having quite the fun conversation," she said.

"You know it, Mai-chan," said Ajisai-san. "Since we're on the subject, were you a part of any clubs when you were in junior high?"

"I would have liked to have done something, but my familial circumstances didn't permit it," Mai explained. "But as I was required to have a club membership of some kind, I was allowed to join the same literature club as Satsuki."

"Aww. You guys used to be clubmates."

"I wouldn't word it like that, per se," Satsuki-san said, joining in the conversation. Ah yes, the kaiju who'd gone on a rampage yesterday: Satsukizilla. "She only showed up when it suited her, and she didn't use her time there well either. She didn't even read any of the books I recommended to her."

"That's because you devour books at your pace," Mai said. "I couldn't keep up with you."

"Excuses, excuses."

Ajisai-san turned the conversation back to me. "How about you, Rena-chan? Were you in any clubs in junior high?"

"Huh, me?!"

Oh no. I'd been afraid that was where this conversation was headed. Oh god, what was I supposed to do? Okay. Time to employ my truth-fudging technique: hide the truth, never tell them the important

bit, and make them get the wrong idea.

"I was sorta in the basketball club," I said.

"Ooh, wow. I would never have expected that," said Ajisai-san.

"I mean, I wasn't that serious about it. You know how it is."

Yeah, I'd shown up on the first day of club and struggled through the weight training for a month or so, but then I didn't want to go anymore and put in an application to change clubs. That's what you call communication skills right there.

"Well, let me tell you, it makes me feel a lot better to hear you have experience in basketball," Ajisai-san said.

"Huh? Uh, yeah, sure. I do."

I nodded, my brain filling with question marks. What the heck was she talking about? PE, maybe?

"Oh yes, absolutely," Mai chimed in. Satsuki-san, meanwhile, looked bored and went back to her seat.

Seriously, what was this all about? But I soon found out during our next home room.

There was an event written up on the blackboard, featuring both softball and basketball. All the girls in the class had to pick one or the other. Naturally, I wanted to go for softball, because it required a lot less individual responsibility than basketball.

And yet, and yet—my name was already up there on the board under the basketball heading. How the heck had this happened to me?!

Home room went on as I sat there trembling. Our two class committee members, Shimizu-kun and Kaho-chan, stood in front of the blackboard and cheerfully filled in all the names.

Kaho-chan chuckled. "We're gonna go out there and win this

thing!"

Damn it! If I'd laughed and been like, "Aw, man, basketball's too much effort. I'm cool with softball," then maybe they'd have let that slide. After all, I was the Quintet's Amaori Renako. One of the top! Girls! In! The! Class! But…

The top girls in the class all got there from being, like, cute, carrying on funny conversations, getting good grades, being fashionable, and so on. That's what made other people respect them and gave them an aristocratic status. If I acted noncommittal or did contemptible things, I wouldn't be cut out to be a top kid in the class. Then everyone would hate me, and I'd be kicked from the Quintet! And besides, everyone in class was counting on me, since I said I used to play basketball.

How far could I exercise my Quintet authority? I really needed to find the exact boundary line. Was this it?

As I watched, the members of the basketball team were decided. I felt like I was watching a little too closely, but under my intense supervision, things surprisingly turned out for the better. Three out of the team's five members came from the Quintet: me, Kaho-chan, and Satsuki-san.

"That's 'cause nobody can beat Mai-Mai in softball!" Kaho-chan declared.

"I will do my best," Mai pledged, and all the other girls picked for softball looked relieved.

Ajisai-san clapped. "I wouldn't expect any less of you, Mai-chan."

Mai chuckled. "Thank you for saying so. I'm sure that'll help me go above and beyond what I normally do. All right. Let me promise to lead Class A to victory."

All the girls who'd picked softball stared at Mai like they'd already

fallen in love with her. Truly, she was Ashigaya's super darling.

"And!" Kaho-chan went on, whacking the blackboard, "Our class's second ace is here on the basketball team. Putting Saa-chan here makes this the strongest arrangement for Class A."

Personally speaking, I wanted to see Mai and Satsuki-san bring on a double assault, but Satsuki-san seemed opposed to that. And I mean, I wanted to have Satsuki-san on my team too!

"Dang, the girls in our class are freaking tough," Shimizu-kun muttered seriously, arms folded. The rest of the boys agreed. (By the way, the boys were apparently playing futsal and volleyball.)

"All righty," Kaho-chan said, "let's rock this thing!" She cheered and pumped her fist in the air. Apparently unsatisfied by my lack of reaction, she then pointed straight at me. Huh? "Let's rock this thing, Rena-chin!" she repeated.

All attention turned toward me. Wait, wait, wait! Frantically, I copied Kaho-chan and raised my fist too. "Hip, hip…hooray?" I offered.

"Uh-huh, that's it!"

Kaho-chan grinned and gave me a thumbs-up, and the class seemed happy too. Thank god. I guess that was the right answer.

Now with our teams squared away, the interclass athletics competition was two weeks off. I had until then to work my butt off to make sure I dragged down Kaho-chan and Satsuki-san as little as possible!

I'd never expected the competition to turn into such an unwinnable battle. I thought things were smooth sailing. I was perfectly fine with a chill high school experience dating Mai and Ajisai-san! Nooo!

Group Chat Name: 5déesses (4)
Part 2

Queen: …

Queen: This feels almost like a wake.

Crane-chan: Boo-hoo…

Crane-chan: She's so horrid… How could she say such cruel things to us?

Crane-chan: It was just a torrent of abuse pouring out of her like a fountain… Curse you, Koto Satsuki.

Queen: Did she really get the better of you that easily?

Star Lily: It was awful! She's a demon, I tell you!

Queen: So she isn't a mere Oduka Mai flunky, I take it.

Crane-chan: Maybe…

Star Lily: ?

Crane-chan: Maybe… She's Oduka Mai's hired bodyguard…

Crane-chan: No, or perhaps a hired assassin…?

Star Lily: ?!

Queen: That's absurd.

Crane-chan: Did you see the look in her eyes? The only way to explain that is if she's killed a man.

Star Lily: True!!!

Star Lily: But then what are we supposed to do?

Star Lily: If we take down Oduka Mai, will we get an assassin after us?!

Crane-chan: No, Haga, it's the other way around.

Star Lily: Wdym?

Crane-chan: If we depose Oduka Mai from her throne, we'll weaken the glue that binds them together.

Star Lily: So if Koto Satsuki is a woman for hire, could we pay her money to switch sides?

Crane-chan: It's certainly possible. I think it's a realistic idea

Queen: I wonder about that…

Star Lily: So…you're saying we have no other choice but to try.

Crane-chan: Correct. First things first, we need to sap the Quintet's fighting strength

Crane-chan: And in order to do that, our next target is…

Chapter 2:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Do Steady Practice!

I STOPPED IN at a sporting equipment shop on the way home from school and bought a basketball for my own personal use. It stirred up memories of when I was a little kid in PE in elementary school. We were all playing ball games in the gym, everyone playing with whatever ball they wanted. I thought the big basketballs were super cool, and I wanted to go off and play on my own. But since we didn't have very many balls, they told me I couldn't play alone and forced me into a group game. There were about four or five of us passing the thing around, so I didn't get as many chances to touch the ball. I remember pondering sadly that something about it just wasn't quite what I'd imagined.

That's probably what prompted me to join the basketball club in junior high. But they wouldn't let me touch the ball there either, and since I sucked at social interactions, I ended up quitting again real quick.

But now, on the way home, as I held my very own basketball, it suddenly occurred to me that buying a basketball would have let me play alone whenever I wanted to, an idea that had never even crossed my mind before. I'd figured basketballs were *school* items, so of course you used them at school.

There were so many times I remembered feeling like, "Wait, I can do that?" The day I posted a message on social media by myself. The day I played my first computer game. The day I styled my bangs on my own.

As I went home, I felt like a whole new person, broadening my horizons bit by bit. I decided that, after school tomorrow, I'd take my

ball to the nearby park.

As thrilled as I was to have a basketball for me and me alone, I also felt a little inexplicably embarrassed.

The deserted sports area in the public park was just a few minutes' walk from my house. It had two basketball courts, and I stood alone in one of them, wearing my PE uniform.

Thump, thump, thump. The sound of the ball smacking the ground reverberated around the court. God, this was kinda mortifying. You know, the whole idea of the athlete playing outside alone, the people who are fundamentally good at what they do, the whole lone, hardworking wolf schtick. It felt kinda like that. But all I was doing was just dribbling by myself, my hands a flustered, waving mess. Whenever an older person walking their dog or a kid on the way home from school passed by, I broke out into a weird sweat. I kept imagining them being like, "She's not very good, but she's certainly trying her best," and snickering. Like an "Oh, good for her" kind of thing.

Nooooo… If people were going to be watching, I wanted to be way better before I hit the courts publicly for the first time… Like spending a year practicing dribbling in my own room first, that kind of thing! The competition would be long finished by then, but you know what I mean!

At the very least, if I had someone here to keep me company, then I probably wouldn't be so sensitive to all these eyes on me. Being alone was difficult. I'd take anyone. Come on, give me someone!

And just as I had that thought, I heard the chime of a bike bell. I jumped and spun around.

"What's shakin', bacon?"

"K-Kaho-chan!" I cried. My face lit up. "This is like when you need a weapon but don't care what, and the game drops the strongest assault

rifle right next to you!"

"I have, like, no clue what you're going on about," she said, "but I guess that means you're happy to see me."

Kaho-chan parked her bike and trotted over. She was wearing exercise clothes too, but she had a pleated sports skirt that was both good for moving in and fashionable. Quintalicious! (That's the sound of admiration.)

"Wh-what brings you here?" I asked.

"When you look at me with big, glowy, expectant eyes, it's kinda hard to joke around and pretend I was just passing by," she said.

She showed me her phone. "And, like, what else was I supposed to do? You were blowing up my phone with stuff like, 'I'm going to start training in basketball today! (wink wink) Starting at 4:30 in the park! (nudge nudge) All by myself! (wink wink nudge nudge)' The hint dropping is disgusting!"

Eep. Well, I never expected her to actually show up…

I must note that I also tried this maneuver on Satsuki-san, but she totally left me on read.

"Thank you, thank you," I said. "Kaho-chan, you are indeed my best friend for forever."

"Aw, jeez," she said. "You sure know how to lay it on thick. Whatever, it's no biggie. I wanted to get some practice in anyway. Now you still have twenty bestie points left."

"What're bestie points?!" Here came a whole new mechanic out of nowhere.

"If you use 'em too willy-nilly, you drop from bestie to buddy, from buddy to somebody, and then from somebody to who are you again?"

“And how many did I use up with this…?”

Kaho-chan lifted a finger. “’Bout a hundred.”

“And I only have twenty left?! Go home, Kaho-chan, now! Delete all the messages! I’ll practice on my own.”

“Nah, I’m just yankin’ your chain.” She grinned at me with her fang sticking out, evidently amused. Grr… She was screwing with me again!

“Hey, c’mon, pass the ball,” she said.

“Oh, right.”

From what I remembered, you had to hold it in front of your chest like you were about to thrust it out. I tossed it to her, and she caught it and started to dribble. I didn’t have the know-how to comment on anyone’s dribbling technique, but she seemed to be doing pretty good. Although maybe that was only because Kaho-chan was so darn cute she looked good doing anything.

“Aighty, c’mon, Rena-chin.”

“O-okay!”

I hunkered down and ran at Kaho-chan. I was confident (in as much as I could be) of my defense skills. I mean, I had good reflexes from playing FPS games.

I reached out as far as I could and nimbly whisked the ball out of her hands! (Jk, I missed.)

I didn’t say anything, but Kaho-chan giggled.

Okay, *now* I whisked the ball out of her hands! (Jk, I missed again.)

Whisk, whisk, whisk! (Jk, Jk, Jk.)

Kaho-chan nimbly moved the ball left and right and slipped past me before I could so much as blink. Argh. Unchecked by me, she made

her way to the hoop and launched a jump shot. The ball traced a parabola in the air and swished through the net beautifully.

"Oh hey, I made it in," Kaho-chan said.

"Say whaaa?" I followed the path of the ball with my eyes, dumbfounded. I couldn't believe it. "Kaho-chan, are you that good…?"

Kaho-chan picked up the ball as it rolled away and boasted, "I guess that's 'cause I'm cosplaying a basketball player right now."

"I call BS!" I retorted. "If that's how it worked, you'd be literally unstoppable in everything. What're you, an innate copycat?"

"You're a riot," Kaho-chan said. "You always have ginormous reactions."

Believe me, I wasn't doing this for her entertainment!

"Anyway, forget cosplay," she said. "I'm really not all that good. I'm just kinda average, y'know? That means that *you're* the problem here."

"Me?"

Kaho-chan put a hand to her mouth and snickered, fangs peeping out past her lips. "That's. 'Cause. You. Suuuck," she singsonged.

"How dare you?!"

I challenged Kaho-chan once again. No more playing Mr. Nice Guy, oh no! I'd show her! But…

"Ooh, Rena-chin's *weeaaaak*."

"Oooh, you'll never beat *meeee*. Loooser, loooser, looooooooseeeeeeer."

“Oooooh, guess who lost again? You sure do love losing, don’t you, Rena-chin?”

I fell to the ground and yelled, “Goddamnit!”

I couldn’t win at all. I’d already racked up maybe twenty losses in a row. Heck, I hadn’t even touched the ball once. I felt buried up to my waist in the snowdrifts of disgrace.

Kaho-chan stuck her tongue out and laughed. “Sorry, I was having so much fun, I got a li’l carried away. I didn’t mean to beat you *that* badly. C’mon, cheer up.”

She patted me on the head with her tiny hand. This was too blatantly an attempt at the carrot and stick method, and yet I was still glad that she was being nice to me. Kaho-chan had full control over my nervous system, like she knew exactly what provocation would cause which reaction. Damn. Damn! That only made things more frustrating.

“I’m not gonna play with you anymore,” I whined.

“Aw, why not? Are you sulking? Sulky sulky Rena-chin-chan?”

“Hmmph!” I puffed up my cheeks and looked the other way. *Yeah! This is what you get!*

“C’mon, Rena-chin, Rena-chin, Reeena-chin. Look at me. Lookie, lookie.”

I resolved to not react as she poked at my pouting cheeks. I-it did tickle, though.

She then laid a hand on my cheek. Huh? Slowly, she forced me to turn in her direction.

“Whoa!” I cried.

Kaho-chan’s face was startlingly close. The heat of her stare was so intense my cheeks were on fire within moments. Eeep.

As she hit me with those pretty girl puppy-dog eyes at point-blank, she whispered to me, “Rena-chin… I’m sorry. I feel really bad, I prommy. Could you forgive me?”

The direct attack messed with my brain. “Ughhhhhhh,” I groaned. “Yeah, I forgive you…”

“Yay! Love ya lots, Rena-chin!”

Kaho-chan patted me on the head. She sure had a lot of variation in her apology repertoire, between all this and the groveling she’d done the other day. But to top it all off, each of them had the power to deal a knockout blow. With apologies like these, I’d forgive her even if she dumped muddy water over my head for no reason. This spelled disaster. Nothing went my way when Kaho-chan was in perky girl mode. I felt like a maid at the complete mercy of her super powerful mistress.

“Kaho-chan, why don’t you put your glasses on for a bit…?” I suggested.

“Why? We’re in the middle of exercising.”

Yeah, but I had the advantage against that Kaho-chan!

Unable to think up anything productive to suggest, I hung my head. Kaho-chan was too strong. I couldn’t beat her…

“Hey, just so y’know, you’ve been really hanging back this whole time,” Kaho-chan told me. “You being shy, Rena-chin?”

“Being shy?” I repeated. Was I?

“Like, I didn’t feel any kind of pressure from your defense, y’know? Like you were being really timid. There was this big ol’ gap between us. You gotta get close or else you’re never gonna reach me. You feel me?”

“I mean. That’s kinda…”

My heart skipped a beat. I knew what she was talking about, of

course. But at the same time…

"If I do that," I said, "I might accidentally touch you."

"Nah, nah, nah." She waved her hand no, her expression serious. "That's a gimme in sports."

"No, it's not!" I insisted. "I can't possibly touch you by accident in the middle of all the confusion. That'd be hella rude!"

"Weren't you literally just hugging me, like, two minutes ago?!"

"Yeah, well that was different. That's because I was in a crisis. *This* is another thing entirely!"

How come she didn't get it? When Kaho-chan was dribbling and looking straight at me, I felt like she could predict every one of my actions. It was super embarrassing. Besides, Kaho-chan was so skinny that I felt like I'd knock her over (and then with her lying there under me…well, we all know where *that* goes) if I touched her.

In other words, that meant: "Kaho-chan, it's all your fault for being so darn cute!"

My shout echoed across the basketball court.

Kaho-chan's eyes lit up with an alluring gleam. "Oooh~"

"Gah!" I felt like I'd gone and dug my own grave again.

Kaho-chan got a flirty little smile on her face and opened both arms. "All right. C'mere, then."

"What?!"

"We're gonna have a special training to get you used to touching women's bodies," she said.

"I have one of those too, you know!"

I stuck my hands all over myself to show her, but Kaho-chan didn't let that count.

“If we don’t do anything,” she said, “you’re gonna make for a rotten teammate, y’know?”

“Gah!” I said again. “T-true, but still! Look, the girls on the other team can’t be as cute as you, right?”

“What if they are?”

“They won’t be! You’re the cutest person in the whole world, Kaho-chan.”

“Maybe so,” she said, easily accepting that title, “but no matter who we’re facing off against, you’re still not gonna be able to touch ’em, y’know? If you don’t practice, then there’s no way you can do it when it comes to the real deal. See, before a shoot, I always practice with a camera in front of my mirror and figure out what makes me look best.”

The additional argument of Kaho-chan’s hard work as a cosplayer sunk my opposition.

“Fine, fine!” I said. “I get it. I’ll do it, I’ll do it. Happy?” *But don’t say I didn’t warn you!*

I’d already touched glasses!Kaho-chan once when I’d washed her, and above all else, I’d gotten my hands all over Mai during Touched Time. Right? Well, let’s say that I did! So a little thing like peppy!Kaho-chan wasn’t going to stop me. I was going to have her making weird noises again, just you wait and see.

“You little friggen-fraggen…” I mumbled as I squeezed her upper arms.

They were really soft and almost too slender. Oh no. I was already getting mortified.

“C’mon, do more!” she encouraged.

“F-fine, here!”

Now I touched the side of her torso. It was soft, but I could tell she

had real muscle there. Regardless of whether I wanted to see it or not, the memory of her naked as I washed her back flashed through my mind's eye.

"That's not gonna cut it!" Kaho-chan insisted. "The offense'll blow right through you. C'mon, put your whole body into it and slam into me! Like boom!"

"Wh-whoa!"

Kaho-chan launched herself at me and slammed into me hard, but I caught myself with my back leg. We ended up so close we were basically hugging. She was all warm from exercising, and it felt as nice as if I were cuddling a small animal.

But also, she was pushing really hard! *Hey now, Kaho-chan!*

"Move it, buster!" she said.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

Now wasn't the time to be shy. If I didn't push back with all my might, she was going to topple me to the ground. So I hugged her petite frame and gritted my teeth as hard as I could, almost sumo wrestler-esque. However, I couldn't hold out any longer, and she pushed me over.

Ack! I hit my back a little. Ow.

When I slowly looked up, I saw Kaho-chan sitting up astride my waist. But even though she was right on top of me, I didn't feel her at all. She was just too light for that. She placed her hands on my chest as she straddled me. *Hey, don't you think that was a* little *too much?* For, you know, a lot of reasons! Gh… I looked away.

"Rena-chin," she said.

"What do you want…?"

Her palms pressed down on my chest. She was crushing my lungs,

making it harder to breathe. If she was going to touch my boobs, she could at least be a little gentler about it… Wait, no, that was a problem in and of itself too!

With a vague sort of expression, Kaho-chan said, “Wow, I’m riding on you while your face is all red. This is kinda steamy, don’t’cha think?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

I lurched up and Kaho-chan fell back with a little shriek.

At any rate…Kaho-chan’s drastic measures had made me somewhat more acclimated to women’s bodies…I think. Granted, that was due to the resultant “You bastard!” feeling, but whatever.

After that, we took turns practicing offense and defense until we sat down on a bench to give our hot and sweaty selves a break.

“Phew,” Kaho-chan said. “I’m pooped.”

“Y-yeah, I’m exhausted…”

“Before we start working on your skills,” she said, “we gotta get you some stamina, girl.”

“If this were an FPS game,” I groaned in agony, “I could run for hours just by holding down a single key.”

“The video games have rotted your brain,” Kaho-chan muttered.

It was starting to get dark. As Kaho-chan sat there under the light of the street lamp, she seemed a little different from how she’d been before, kinda mellower. She opened her mouth and said, “So, how’re things going with Mai-Mai and Aa-chan?”

“What do you mean?”

When I looked at her, Kaho-chan tilted her head slightly so I couldn’t see her face. “C’mon, you were the one who was talking ’bout how nervous you were. But you just act like everything’s A-okay at

school.”

Ah, true.

“Well… I appreciate you asking. I guess…we’re making it work.”

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a lingering throbbing pain where she’d headbutted me.

“Huh, cool.” Then, after a beat, she added, “I’ve been cosplaying since junior high, and I’ve heard a ton of gossip over how messy guy and girl stuff can get. That made me think there was no way three people dating would ever work out.”

“Urgh… Yeah, I get that,” I said.

“But you’ve always done stuff that I could never even dream of. So maybe, y’know, you guys might have a chance.”

“Uh.”

That probably meant that she was rooting for me.

Kaho-chan pointed a finger straight at me that came to rest just before the tip of my nose. Eep.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, ’mkay? This is just my opinion as your pal. As an ordinary teen and as a huge Mai-Mai fan, I am noooot on board.”

“R-right,” I said.

“Like, I’ve never really seriously thought about dating and stuff like you do, so I just think it’s kinda off for me to criticize your decision on a common sense basis, y’know?”

Kaho-chan stood up and chucked the ball at the hoop. It fell short and rolled away.

“Kaho-chan, have you ever thought you’d want to date someone?” I asked.

“Sure, like, if Mai-Mai was up for it. Or just that I should, ’cause I’m cosplaying as a people person. But never anything too deep.”

“But you said you get crushes and stuff—”

“Crushes are crushes!” she said. “They don’t mean I *like* like people. I mean, I don’t know how anything works with love or the kind of *like* liking you do!”

Kaho-chan ran off to go pick up the ball. In the fading light, I thought I saw her embarrassed face turning red.

“A-anyway, what I’m tryna say is that you can complain to me if you want, ’mkay? Mai and Aa-chan are my real good buddies too, so you’d better make ’em happy. If you don’t, you’re gonna get it, missy!”

“Oh, Kaho-chan…”

Her words made me realize something. Yeah, I guess there was that aspect to it as well. I always thought that whatever went on between couples didn’t affect any third parties. But to people who cared for Mai and Ajisai-san and wished them happiness, I was an uncertain and dangerous element. It would’ve been better if we were a conventional couple, but I’d chosen to pursue an atypical path and had tons of reproach-worthy traits to boot. So that meant…I needed to be better than an average girlfriend, or else no one would accept us. People were absolutely going to tell them, “You should stop seeing her!” or “There’s better people out there.” And Mai and Ajisai-san would feel hurt if one of their loved ones told them that. Was not hearing those things all dependent on how hard I worked? God, I didn’t know. Now I felt even more pressure coming in from this unexpected angle.

But now wasn’t the time to go whining about it.

“Yeah… I really do want to make them happy… Or so I’ve been thinking.” I nodded slightly.

“That was awfully quiet…” Kaho-chan said, looking disgusted. She

fooled around with the ball as she went on. “But I guess back when I started from nothing as a cosplayer, I wasn’t gonna let anyone stop me, no matter if they criticized me or objected to it… So I guess I can’t help but support you with the stance you’re taking… Or, y’know, something like that!”

“Uh-huh.”

I got what she was trying to say. I got that she was encouraging me, that is.

Even though I might not have been up to the task at hand, I lifted my head and grinned. “Thanks, Kaho-chan.”

“You betcha!” She gave me a huge nod back. “But you better not only pay attention to Mai-Mai or Aa-chan and forget about me again! You gotta keep hanging out with me too.”

“Y-yeah, of course.” I stood up and clenched my fists. I could say this with conviction. “After all, I’m really glad we got to reconnect. I want to get even closer to you now too! I still think that my girlfriends and my friends are two separate things, but Kaho-chan, there’s nothing out there that could replace the time I spend with you.”

“O-oh, that’s…good, then…’n stuff.” Kaho-chan held the ball to her face to hide her mouth and mumbled, “So, like…uh, I’m not doin’ anything tomorrow. You wanna come to the park and, like…shoot hoops with me or something?”

The way she asked made it almost sound like she was begging, with the charm of a cat sidling up to me going, “Pet me, pet me.” I averted my eyes as hard as I could. I really wasn’t good with people asking me for stuff like this.

“Sorry…” I said. “I have plans with Ajisai-san tomorrow.”

Kaho-chan lobbed the ball at me. “You frickin’ player, Rena-chin!”

“For the last time, I’m really not!”

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When I ran over to the girl standing in front of the shop, her face lit up. “Rena-chan,” she said.

“S-sorry for being kinda late.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I’ve just been trying to figure out what to order anyway.”

The day after basketball practice with Kaho-chan, I met up with Ajisai-san at a café after school. A new one had opened up nearby, and we’d been talking about wanting to check it out together.

I peered inside. Since it’d just opened, the place was jam-packed with kids from Ashigaya. Like, it was pretty crowded in there.

When we went in, we were taken to a seat in the back. I sat down opposite Ajisai-san and relaxed.

“Get this,” I said, “I had another confrontation with Takada-san at the shoe lockers when I was leaving.”

“Oh, really? Did it go okay?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Yeah, there were too many people watching for her to do anything. But I guess she’s still hung up on this competition thing… Even though the members for the inter-class athletics competition are already set in stone.”

“Mai-chan and I are doing softball, and the rest of you guys are on basketball, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

That meant that, by virtue of the Quintet being split up, we

couldn't have a direct showdown with the 5déesses. And we couldn't swap out members this late in the game even if they tried. I wished they would just give me a break already. Oh, but if I started looking glum, Ajisai-san would get worried. *Smile, smile,* I reminded myself.

"A-anyway, let's eat some sweet treats and forget about all that," I suggested. I flipped over the menu and showed it to Ajisai-san.

"R-right, sure," she said. "I mean, this *is* a date, after all…isn't it?" She grinned, her cheeks turning red.

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah, it is!"

"Date" was such a tiny word, but oh, how it could evoke anxiety in me! That's right, this was a date… It *was* a date… It *WAS* a date… Being aware of it made me overly conscious of it, even though I'd tried to prevent that by using a euphemism and telling Kaho-chan I just had "plans."

Also, hold the phone.

"Is this, uh, our first date as a couple…?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, y-yeah… I-I guess it is." Ajisai-san nodded woodenly.

Given the way she looked, it was possible that she'd already been hit by that realization. Oh my god.

"I can't believe," I said, "that our first date is just *at a café on the way home from school*."

"R-Rena-chan?" she asked.

I trembled. "We should have done something more dramatic. We should have gone to a restaurant in a high rise and gotten a window seat so we could look out over the city at night time. I should have actually dressed up for it. We should have toasted with champagne and crap…"

"Rena-chan?!"

"But no, we had this instead… Our first date, and it's a reasonably

priced shop that fits a student's budget… My girlfriend assessment scores must be nosediving!"

"Rena-chan. Rena-chan!"

"Oh!" Ajisai-san tapped the top of my hand, and I came back to reality. "S-sorry about that."

"Jeez," she said. "Your brain took a page out of Mai-chan's book there, huh?"

"Yeah, for real."

It astonished me. If I kept using Mai as the standard for dates, I'd never be able to have a romance on a reasonable scale again. If I kept showing off despite not swimming in cash, I'd end up as the kind of girl who racked up debts but kept up appearances in front of her partner. And it was all Mai's fault! I was doomed!

Ajisai-san wrapped her hand around mine. "You know, I like dates that are big, grand events like that. I mean, who doesn't? But what's way more important to me is getting to spend lots of time with you. Don't put me on hold for two weeks just to prep for something big or anything, okay?"

"Okay, I get you… You're saying Party C cannot shirk their normal duties while also handling a special assignment."

"That's not at all what I'm saying!"

Uh-oh, the Girlfriend Project Business Proposal me was back.

Ajisai-san sighed. "Oh, whatever. It's fine. I know you're trying your best for me."

Did I really just make Ajisai-san sigh?! You mean to tell me that Ajisai-san sighs at people? Oh, I was done for. I was doomer than doomed. She was going to ask me to break up right here at this very café. "I thought I had feelings for you, but I guess I was wrong," she

would say, staring down at me with cold eyes. “We really should have just stayed friends, I think. See you around.” Then she’d dump water over my head and leave me sitting in the café all alone. *Ajisai-san, don’t leave me…*

“So you see, I’m going to be patient and talk things through with you until I make sure you really understand, you know? It’s like when I tell off the kiddos. I have to make sure they really get it.” Then, as Ajisai-san looked at me like an oneechan, her mouth formed a round “o.” “Rena-chan, why’re you crying?!”

“I-I thought you were going to leave me here or something…”

Ajisai-san let out a little sigh once more. Again with the sighing!

“I’m really going to try my best to make sure you understand just how much I care for you,” she said, as if to strengthen her resolve once more.

God, I wished I was just a *little* more emotionally stable!

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But for the time being, she’d accepted my “please don’t leave me” plea, and so with that paper-thin layer of salvation between me and utter doom, Ajisai-san and I looked down at the menu. You know, I just had this feeling like—I was the one who’d promised to make her and Mai happy, you know? But wasn’t I kind of a basket case? Or was that only my imagination?

“Ooh, look at this, Rena-chan,” Ajisai-san said.

“A new menu item, huh? A couple’s set?”

It was a campaign where two people could get cake combos for a slight discount. I figured they’d made it for the fun of it, what with a

school being so close by and all.

“I-I’m kinda embarrassed to order that…” I said.

“Y-yeah, same…” Ajisai-san agreed.

A pair of penny-pinching high school girls being like “We’re a couple uwu!!” was cute and all, but Ajisai-san and I were a legit couple. So, like…we’d totally turn bright red.

As I picked out what to drink, Ajisai-san went back to the conversation at hand. “Hey, Rena-chan, um. Have you said that sort of thing to Mai before too?”

That sort of thing being “don’t leave me,” already this month’s nominee for thing I most wanted to leave behind in my dark past. Hmm.

“I…don’t think so,” I said.

“Huh, really?” She looked surprised.

“Yeah.”

“Why not?”

Why not? Well, she had a point—Mai was so super rich and a famous model and all that, so she had plenty of chances to meet attractive girls. If you were going to list it out, then Mai seemed way more liable to ditch me by the roadside than Ajisai-san. (How cruel.)

But at the same time, how come I doubted she ever would? When I tried putting it into words, the answer came out all too easily.

“I guess because I know she likes me and all…” I admitted.

Ajisai-san pinned down that vague sentence of mine and pressed for more details. “How do you know that?”

“Uh…”

I could give a lot of concrete examples. Like there was the time we fell off the roof together. Or the fact that she’d go after me for my body

at the drop of a hat. All the kisses, all the faces that she wouldn't let anyone else see but me. The way she blew up my phone with messages and photos. But those were all things I couldn't tell Ajisai-san! It was the way all that stuff worked together that drove home the point for me that Mai actually had feelings for me.

As I ummed and uhhed, Ajisai-san quietly closed her eyes. "I get it now," she said. For some reason, she sounded as filled with fortitude as the forty-seven ronin before their big raid. *Wh-what was this all about?*

Then Ajisai-san's hand shot upward, and she called for the waitress. She then proceeded to place the order, "W-we'd like to order the couple's set, please!"

Ajisai-san?!

"Um, I'd like the milk tea and the Basque cheesecake please. R-Rena-chan, what're you having?"

"U-um, I'll take…"

After we finished our flustered ordering and the waitress left, we both sat there in silence. Ajisai-san hung her head, her face bright red.

"I-I mean, we're a couple and all," she said.

"H-huh?"

She pouted like she was complaining. "You know. It's because we're a real couple and everything…"

"I-I mean, that's true…"

I really wasn't sure what had caused Ajisai-san to flip her switch like that, but…well, it was really embarrassing, that was for sure. Of course, if anyone around us saw that, I'm sure they just assumed that we were two teenage girls doing it for the bit. I mean, even the waitress had smiled a little. But…we were a real couple, so we were really conscious of how people looked at us. It wasn't that people were shooting us

daggers so much as it felt like they were going “Awww,” as if we were a kindergarten art exhibit.

“I’m just really, really trying to make it clear how I feel,” Ajisai-san said in a tiny voice.

“Huh? What was that?”

Just then, the waitress brought us our cake. Ajisai-san broke off a piece of her cheesecake with her fork and then pointed it in my direction. She grinned. “Here, Rena-chan. Say ‘ahh.’”

“Hello?!”

“Come on. Say ‘ahh.’”

“Wait, no, uh!” I said. “We don’t have to go that far, right?!”

I was thinking she meant it as something we had to do in order to play up to the waitress that we’d ordered a couple set, but Ajisai-san apparently had other ideas.

“Won’t you please hurry up and say, ‘ahh,’ Renako-san?”

“Where’d the ‘san’ come from all of a sudden?! You’re freaking me out!”

Ajisai-san half-smiled, clearly holding back an explosion of embarrassment. I’d never seen her like this before.

Oh god. We were slowly but surely catching the attention of people around us. Ajisai-san seemed oblivious to the watching eyes, and it felt like she was backing me up along the edge of a cliff with every passing moment.

“You’d eat it if Mai-chan offered, wouldn’t you? Come on, Rena-chan, don’t be a butt!” Ajisai-san insisted.

“Yeah, but Mai would keep it up incessantly to the point that I’d fold, so it’s not like I would have a choice in the matter!”

“Then I’ll be just as incessant! Come on, say ‘ahh’! Here. ‘Ahh’!”

Ajisai-san kept pushing the fork, a wild look forming in her eyes. If I kept turning her down, I felt like she was going to stab the fork right into my mouth.

My mission was to make her and Mai happy…to grant Ajisai-san’s desires… I decided to consider myself an android made for that exact purpose.

Gripped with the feeling that I was flinging myself off the cliff, I opened my mouth. “A-ahh…!” I said.

Ajisai-san’s face lit up, like a zookeeper who’d succeeded in convincing a creature from an endangered species to eat some food.

I gulped down a gaping bite of the cake she’d offered me. As I watched the fork retreat, I put a hand to my mouth and lifelessly said, “Fyeah, ish…ghood…”

“Good…good! Great, thank you!” Ajisai-san put her hands to her cheeks and beamed.

I mean, I couldn't begin to tell you what it tasted like, but whatever. Ajisai-san sure looked cute when she smiled. I mean, she looked cute when she was mad too. And when she wasn't making any sort of facial expression at all. *And* when she sneered down at me like I was something vulgar (not that I'd ever seen this before).

Still, a smile looked especially good on her. This really was what people meant when they said a smile bloomed across someone's face. Well, if I got a smile like this, that made up for my shame. Boy, handling your girlfriend's coaxing is a real ordeal, don't you think? Tough stuff for sure.

And then, just as I was feeling the same sense of liberation like the afternoon after finals are over, Ajisai-san opened her small mouth once more.

"Okay, now it's your turn, Rena-chan," she said.

"Wait, what?!"

"Ahh."

Wait. Did she mean, she wanted me to do the same to her? To *her*, with her mouth open like a baby bird?

What I had next to me was a tiramisu. I wished I had something that'd be way harder to feed her instead, just to resist this pressuring "Ahh"…like shingen mochi with all its messy kinako powder. Alas, that wasn't on the menu.

"H-hey, Ajisai-san, uh."

"Aren't we a couple, after all?" She pouted ever so slightly and stared at me. She seemed hellbent on using that word today to slaughter me repeatedly.

"Uh. You know. There's, like…tons of people here," I said.

"Won't you please feed me, Renako-san?"

“Calm down, Ajisai-san!”

And for crying out loud, enough with the san! It was freaking me out.

Oh, that’s right. I was an android that existed to bring Ajisai-san happiness. I came to the Sena household when she was born and ever since then I’d stayed with her and kept a protective eye on her as she grew up.

Gh! What was a little thing like this, if it was for my mistress? Yes, it was mortifying as hell, but it wasn’t going to kill me. I’d do it. It was just an ‘ahh’! Heck, I could do that. And I’d already resolved to try my best, so it was time to show that by putting it into action!

Rallying my morale with everything I had, I looked up and saw… Ajisai-san trembling and hiding her face. Oh, not this again.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry, Rena-chan,” she said. “I’ve been saying selfish things nonstop today. It’s okay, we can stop here.”

Oh god, don’t get depressed on me out of nowhere! I thought.

“Wh-what’s the matter?” I asked. “Hey, Ajisai-san! You want to say ‘ahh’, right? ‘Ahh’!”

“No, it’s…it’s okay. Now that I think about it, having my mouth gaping like that and all looks, well, kind of inappropriate…”

“No, it doesn’t,” I said. “You looked cute, Ajisai-san. You were the cutest in the whole world!”

“Mmm, I don’t know…” Ajisai-san looked as distressed as if her head were being squeezed in a ring.

“You wanna say ‘ahh,’ right? You totally do,” I insisted. “We’re not leaving this restaurant until you say ‘ahh’! I mean, we’re a couple, after all. Right?”

I really had no choice at this point but to force her into it. As I

strained myself to put a smile on my face, I thrust a spoonful of tiramisu at her.

"Here, c'mon. Here comes the airplane. Can you open wide for me, Ajisai-chan? Can you say 'ahh'?"

Ajisai-san leaned forward and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Ahh…" she said. Her lips parted before closing over my spoon. Oh. Oh god. For some reason, my heart skipped a beat. This was a scene that could stir the heart of even an android. I mean, like, this was kinda… you know, kinda…!

Her little tongue flicked out and licked the spoon. She smiled modestly. "I love it," she said.

"O-okay…"

Like, this was kinda sensual, you know?!

Hey, I'm not the only one thinking this, right? I thought. *You guys upstairs, you get what I mean? Right?*

The Mai who lived inside my mind said, "I believe this comes from you having your mind in the gutter."

Satsuki-san was disgusted. "You really have no shame… Despicable."

Ajisai-san scoffed, "Gosh, Rena-chan, that's all you ever think about. Sexually frustrated much?"

And then Kaho-chan brought up the rear, whispering to me, "You're a mondo perv, Rena-chin!"

What the heck? How come all four of them ganged up on me? Not one tried to help me out here! Come on, they were people who lived in my brain—you'd think they'd try to be a bit nicer to me!

Ajisai-san—the angel, not the one who lived in my head—laughed. "S-sorry, I just said the weirdest thing. Here, let's dig in."

“R-r-right, let’s!”

Phew. That was a panic and a half right there. Still, that was big of Ajisai-san for bailing me out when it got all weird. Granted, she was the one who made it really freaking weird in the first place, but still.

Ajisai-san carried her fork to her lips. I couldn’t take my eyes off of them…

Wait, no! The brain gang would just start clowning on me again!

I stabbed my spoon into my tiramisu and was just about to dig in when. It. Hit. Me.

God, I really wish it hadn’t.

“Oh god…” I said.

“Hm?” said Ajisai-san.

“Oh, nothing!”

This was the spoon…that’d been in Ajisai-san’s mouth… Could *I* eat dessert with the spoon that’d come into contact with that sacred mouth? Oh heck no.

I called out to the waitress passing by, “Excuse me, could I get a new spoon?”

“Rena-chan?!”

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Kaho-chan lost her mind laughing when I recounted all this to her. “You suck!” she said.

“Ugh…” I hid my face in my hands.

We were practicing basketball again today after school. She’d actually wanted to invite a couple of other people, but Hasegawa-san

and Hirano-san—the other people on the inter-class athletics competition basketball team—couldn't make it because of club stuff. Or so they said, but I had a feeling they'd ducked out because they couldn't bear to be in the same space as two members of the Quintet. It was a relief that my teammates were all girls I knew, but I was concerned that with those two, we might never be able to practice together until the day of the game itself.

Anyway, since neither Kaho-chan or I were all that great at basketball, we were just kinda practicing dribbling, passing, and half-assed shooting. I didn't feel like I was making all that much improvement…

Kaho-chan finally stopped laughing, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Oh my god, you are the literal worst," she told me. "Rena-chin, don'tcha think you're gonna get dumped?"

"Huh?!" My eyes bugged out of their sockets. Ajisai-san, dump me? "No, I'd hate for that to happen…"

"If it does, I'll be around to cheer you up," Kaho-chan said. "God, you're so hopeless!"

She slapped me on the back. Ugh. Now I was getting depressed pretty quickly. "This romance stuff is hard…" I said.

"Honestly, mood."

As I drooped, a realization struck me. Frightened, I took a step back. "Uh… S-sorry, Kaho-chan. Was that a humblebrag again?"

If even Kaho-chan decided to desert me now, I really would give up all hope. I peeked at her to see how she might feel, giving her my most fawning eyes in the process.

"Nah." She shook her head, relaxed. "I dunno, I don't really think so. You're just kinda weird is all. You're doing your best, y'know?"

“Oh, Kaho-chan…” God, having her around was so soothing. “We should live together… And you should take care of me every night… Be my teddy Kaho-chan and listen to all my sorrows…”

“Are you tryna hit on me?” she asked.

“Uh, no!”

My limit was two girlfriends, so my capacity was maxed out already. And, like, even if I had space for more, that didn’t mean it was okay for me to go making the moves on Kaho-chan either! T-to be honest, though, I kinda had a feeling I could somehow pull off casually going out with Kaho-chan… You know, like a taking-friends-to-the-next-level kind of thing… Like, hey, we used to just be friends, and I don’t bother about keeping up appearances…and now we’re living together. But I couldn’t find a good job, so I’m trying to make a living off of gambling at pachinko parlors, which causes endless trouble for Kaho-chan. As I leech off her for money, I’m constantly abusing her and… Wait a minute. This was just the *emotionally unstable, abusive boyfriend Rena-chin and the girl who will never, ever stop loving her no matter how much Rena-chin beats her, so please, please don’t leave her* ASMR series! I guess I’d never be free of Kaho-chan’s hypnosis… Before long, I might even start calling Kaho-chan my dog mommy or something. Or had I done that already? No, no way…

As I trembled on the spot, Kaho-chan made a face like she knew what I was thinking and clapped me on the shoulder. “Got it,” she said. “I’ll make a new ASMR track and send it to you.”

“N-no, you don’t need to do that! I mean, I might listen to it if you send it, but still!”

“Got any requests?”

“Well, maybe one to raise my self-esteem where I’ve got multiple girlfriends all fighting over me…”

Wait, no. I was not into that whatsoever. Noooo, no, no. My only thought was that I wanted to get acclimated to this current situation as soon as possible, so I'd asked for something along the same lines. But believe me, it wasn't because I had any desire for that sort of thing at all! You know that, right?

Just after I mysteriously lashed out, I saw two people appear at the edge of the basketball court—teenage boys. I thought no one came to this park, but they looked like they were here to play basketball too.

"Oh, there they are," Kaho-chan said.

"Huh?"

She gave them a big wave. Wait, what?

"Like, we're not gonna get better practicing on our own, y'know?" she said. "So I figured we'd have 'em around for a day or two to show us the ropes."

"Uh, I don't know about that…"

All the blood drained from my face with a whoosh.

Both boys were students from Class A.

"Yo, wassup, Koyanagi?" said one.

"Heya!" she called back.

Hey, I knew one of these guy's names! That was Shimizu-kun. (I had no clue what his first name was, though.) And the other guy standing behind him, the tall guy, was uhhhhh Yamaguchi-kun from my class, I think.

I tugged on Kaho-chan's arm. "K-Kaho-chan!" I said.

"Huh, what?" She looked back at me, puzzled.

Gah! Right. Kaho-chan had no idea that I wasn't good with guys, since I'd claimed back in elementary that I was a class fave with guys and girls alike. This was a textbook example of being hoisted by my own

petard.

"They're both in the basketball club," she said, "so let's let 'em teach us and level up together!"

True, this would be the simplest and fastest route to getting better. But it was a double-edged sword, because that meant the truth would come out: I was completely unathletic despite once having been in the basketball club. I had to do something that would prevent me from losing my status as a member of the Quintet while also seriously putting in effort to get better at basketball. Oh, right, and I also couldn't let Kaho-chan catch on to the fact that I wasn't any good with guys! God, I had my work cut out for me. I decided to give up on everything and, for the time being, put all my skill points into communication.

"Th-thanks for coming out today, guys," I said. I made myself smile and lean forward in a very peppy-girl type of pose. I bet I looked very upbeat and extroverted…right? I mean, I was an extrovert. Come on now.

Shimizu-kun twirled his basketball on his index finger (how cool!) and said, "Aight, so what're we starting with? Is there any kinda stuff you guys wanna focus on?"

"Shooting!" Kaho-chan's hand shot up in the air. "I wanna learn shooting!"

"Yeah, I guess you can't win if you don't score points, huh?" he said. "Dope. Let's give that a shot."

"Woo-hoo!" Kaho-chan jumped for joy. I guess she was so emotive and easy to read that she could communicate regardless of how girls talk vs how guys talk.

Yamaguchi-kun said to me, "I feel like we haven't really talked before, huh, Amaori-san."

"R-right, I guess not," I said.

This dude was freaking huge and had gnarly muscles, but his face looked kindly enough. Given that, I wasn't nervous…okay, never mind. Not happening. His size alone was enough to rule that out. Big things are freaky, you know?

"I heard you used to be in the basketball club," he said.

"Uh, yeah, but I'm really bad at it…"

He laughed. "And so that's why you're training? That's tight."

"Oh, no, not at all…"

What the heck was I supposed to do? I could barely breathe! Was I pulling off the extrovert act? I doubted it!

"How about we practice shooting for a bit?" he offered. "We'll use that hoop over there."

"S-sure!"

I shouldn't have been so nervous, considering I'd talked to Shimizu-kun before. (A few times. In total.) I had no idea what was a no-go to say with guys, so I ended up only being able to say the most totally inoffensive, milquetoast things possible.

As I trembled at the thought of this, Shimizu-kun jogged over. "Sorry, Yama, you mind helping Koyanagi? I'll take care of Amaori-san. You guys're acting like you've never met."

Oh, Shimizu-kun!

"Okay," I said.

"Nah, dude, we're in the same class and stuff. But it was nice to meet you, Amaori-san."

With a clap on the shoulder, Yamaguchi-kun and Shimizu-kun switched positions. Thank god!

"Aight, you ready to start?" Shimizu-kun asked.

“O-oh, yeah.”

I trailed after him like a baby duckling until we stood under the hoop.

“Let’s do some layups,” he said. “By the way, do you wanna practice shooting two-handed or one-handed? If you wanna hit high spots, one-handed’s the way to go, but two-handed gets you more distance. More girls these days are shooting one-handed like guys do.”

“Um,” I said. “I think we could give one-handed a shot… It, like, seems cooler than two-handed and all.”

“Sick,” he said. “That’s easier for me to show you too.” Shimizu-kun grinned. His boyish smile had a mix of both rugged masculinity and cuteness.

For a while after that, Shimizu-kun walked me through my form. I was still nervous, but since he was teaching me, it was a lot easier to figure out where we both stood. I felt better once I figured out I could repurpose the same attitude I showed my teachers. And! As we practiced, I stopped making shots that never so much as grazed the net and started getting more near misses.

“W-wow,” I said. “This is kind of fun!”

“Glad to hear it.” Shimizu-kun stood under the hoop and caught the rebound before passing it back to me.

I tossed it from where I stood and…it went in. I-it went in!

“It went in!” I cried.

“Yup. Makes sense, if you used to be in the basketball club.”

“I only showed up to practice, like, twice,” I said. “Oh, but don’t tell anyone, okay?!”

“Sure thing.”

As I started to get the hang of it, it got way more fun. At this rate,

I figured I might even go beast mode in the final competition.

"Heck, I might be pretty good!" I said.

"Hell yeah," Shimizu-kun agreed. "The kind of genius born every one hundred years."

I giggled.

Shimizu-kun pointed out whenever my form was wrong or when I threw it too hard, and each time I put more attention on that when making my next shot.

"Oh yeah, by the way," Shimizu-kun said, "sorry to hear about all that crap you guys have going on."

"Huh? What crap?"

"That thing with Class B."

"Huh?" I tilted my head as I held the ball in front of my chest. Boys weren't as emotive in their voices or facial expressions as girls, so I couldn't really tell what he was feeling right now.

"You know. Seems to me like the girls're having a fight," he said.

"Ohhh. It's less that and more like they're targeting us."

"Yeah, but either way, it seems like a real pain in the ass." Shimizu-kun picked up the ball after I dropped it and shot a goal. It soared high up into the air and swished through the net beautifully. "And, like, guys can't really get in the middle of fights between girls, y'know? So I'm sorry all we can do is watch and stuff."

"O-oh, yeah, I see what you mean… Well, thanks anyway."

"That's why I figured helping indirectly would make me feel a little better," he went on. "I'm glad Koyanagi asked us."

He passed me the ball. He was probably holding back some so that I didn't get hurt. Damn, Shimizu-kun… He was one good dude!

“Shimizu-kun, you have a girlfriend, right?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess.” He looked startled for a second there before he went back to normal. “We’ve been dating since junior high, so I guess it’s been around two years now.”

“Uh-huh. I can really tell why you’re so popular.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t say I’m popular or anything.”

I dribbled the ball a couple of times. “You see, I’m not very good at talking to guys,” I explained. “But you’ve been really considerate, which is a big help.”

“Nah, you’re cool,” he said. “Sena and Koyanagi are exceptions, not the norm.”

“How about Oduka-san?” I asked.

“She’s way outta my league.”

Seeing his expression darken made me involuntarily giggle. “Hey, Shimizu-kun, does your girlfriend ever get mad at you?”

“Bro, she is literally always chewing me out for something or other. I keep forgetting to call her and stuff.”

“Gotcha!”

I felt a little more at ease now. It was like, if even tactful Shimizu-kun messed up, then it was simply a matter of course that I’d slip up too.

“How ’bout you, Amaori?” he asked.

“How about me what?”

“Are you seeing anyone right now?”

“U-um, well.”

I looked away for dear life. Saying yes would be embarrassing, but saying no would be a lie. “Sort of. Um, yeah.”

“Cool,” he said. “I kinda figured.”

Shimizu-kun didn't grill me for more details, thank god.

"You seem like the popular type," he added.

"I…I really don't think so!"

I was about to tell him that this was because I was the most eligible bachelorette among the Quintet, but then I decided this wasn't something I should tell a guy. Heck, I really *was* the kind of genius that came around once every hundred years.

We kept chatting for a while longer while practicing our shooting until I inadvertently shouted, "Ah!"

"What's the matter?" Shimizu-kun asked.

"What time is it?! Oh, shoot!"

I galloped to my backpack and dug out my phone. Oh god, it was already this late.

Besides Shimizu-kun, Yamaguchi-kun and Kaho-chan came over too. "What's wrong, Rena-chin?" Kaho-chan asked.

"I have plans after this!"

"Ooh. Well look at you, little miss popular," she said with a glare. *Don't do that in front of other people!*

Just then, my phone rang, and the caller ID showed it was from Mai. I immediately picked up. "H-hello!"

"Why, hello, Renako," Mai said. "I'm sorry, do you have a moment to talk about our plans?"

"S-sure."

"I'm afraid my work schedule is a bit compacted, so I might run late today. I'd prefer if you didn't wait for me and instead went straight to my apartment."

"Oh… Okay."

Honestly, it was already past the point when I needed to leave, but if Mai was working late, I guess I'd be on time somehow. Today was my lucky day.

"Where are you now?" Mai asked.

"Uh, I'm just practicing basketball at the park near my house."

"Oh? Then let me send someone to pick you up."

"Oh, okay. Sure."

After I hung up, I sent Mai the address. There, all taken care of. Actually, not at all. I hadn't told our helpers an ending time today even after they'd gone out of their way for us.

I whirled around and bowed deep.

"Sorry, Shimizu-kun and Yamaguchi-kun!" I said. "You guys were kind enough to teach me, but I have plans after this I need to get to."

"Nah, it's all good," Shimizu-kun said. "I was actually just thinking I need to get going pretty soon too. Same with you, Yama?"

"Yeah, it's getting dark," Yamaguchi-kun agreed. "So, how was it, Amaori-san? Do you feel like you got any better?"

"Y-yeah, I did. I think. Thanks, guys!"

I smiled awkwardly and bowed once more.

As we were still saying our goodbyes, Kaho-chan stretched as far as she could go. "Mmm!" she said. "Boy, I sure worked up a sweat practicing today. Can't wait to get home and pop in the shower!"

I laughed. "I feel you there, Kaho-chan."

Just then, it hit me. Someone was coming to pick me up…which meant…

"I don't have the time for a shower!" I yelled.

My ride showed up not long after. A huge limousine pulled up

alongside the park, and both Shimizu-kun and Yamaguchi-kun, who were still hanging around for some reason, made twin “ooh” noises of admiration.

“Sorry—bye—sorry—see you later!” I said.

Last, Kaho-chan gave me a big wave of farewell. “’Kay ’kay, good luck!” she called.

I had no idea what she was telling me good luck for, but also? Mood.

Thus, I set off for the princess’s castle clad in my workout clothes and with a basketball under one arm. You gotta wonder: what was the point of a glamorous carriage when I looked like a mess?

I sighed. If nothing else, I wished I had at least brought a change of clothes.

Inside the limo, I sniffed my shirt. Bluh. I smelled like sweat! Now that I’d decided to try my best at one thing, I was slipping on everything else.

Today, I had dinner plans with Mai. My thought was that since I’d gone to that café with Ajisai-san, Mai should be next. So I’d asked her if there was anything she’d like to do. I think she was really looking forward to this. But if I didn’t take it seriously, it would seem like I didn’t prioritize her. Well, Mai was nice, so she probably wouldn’t think that…but I’d definitely give myself a failing grade and beat myself up for not trying my best. A zero on the project assessment sheet! No contract renewal for me! Ugh, I really wasn’t a people person at all…

“Is something the matter?” asked a female voice from the driver’s seat.

“Oh, um. No,” I said. I must have looked like a total mess. Ugh,

what a disaster I was… I folded in on myself. “I was just out exercising, so I think I smell…and, you know, I look like this, and…”

“I see,” the driver said. “You’re quite correct in both assumptions.”

My head jerked up out of reflex. The woman in the driver’s seat was—

“Agh!” I screamed. “Hanatori-san!”

She said nothing. I retreated to the far corner of the limousine, cowering and trembling. I was one-on-one with Hanatori-san in a locked space! In the end, I’d chosen *both* Mai and Ajisai-san. And to make matters worse, I’d talked about Touchy Time and Touched Time right in front of her! Oh my god. She was going to kill me.

“Where are you taking me?!” I demanded.

“To my mistress’s residence,” she said.

“Liar! I’m going to end up alone in an abandoned building in the mountains being chased by a murderer dressed as a clown.”

“Well, if that’s what you would prefer.”

“Nooo!”

I wept silent tears of extreme fear. “Things have just started to get better for me, but I don’t want to die here. Not now, not like this…not when there are so many good games coming out in the next two months…”

Ah, I’d never before realized how much I wanted to live. But recently, my grades had started picking up bit by bit, and all my friends weren’t being mean to me either. I wished I could be given just a little longer to live…an additional eighty years or so… By that point in time, the PS20 would be out and they’d have full dive VR, so even lame ol’ me could have the time of my life being the brave hero who saved the village.

“We’re here,” Hanatori-san said.

I yelped, and the car stopped. Timidly, I looked out the window and saw a familiar parking garage. O-oh…

“This is Mai’s apartment…” I said.

“As was stated earlier.”

I looked up at Hanatori-san with twinkling eyes. “Hanatori-san, could this mean…I have your seal of approval…?!”

She threw me a cold look. “What do you take me for? The manager of a death game?”

She left the car, opened the door, and escorted me inside with a “Right this way.”

“R-right,” I said.

I quailed as she looked me up and down, her indifferent expression growing even more dour.

“Indeed, I cannot let you see my mistress in such a state. I will see to it that you have a change of clothes. Please come inside.”

“Hanatori-san!” I exclaimed. I knew it! She really was doing a nice thing for me.

“I will expend every effort to ensure that my mistress does not one day look back on having fraternized with you and hurt herself with the thought. Now, please, do conduct yourself around her as best you can.”

“Ah, will do…”

She was on my side… Or was she? How would you even classify that? Well, she was on Mai’s side, so that meant she was on mine as well, right? Hmm. Yeah, I wasn’t sure about that.

I got on the elevator she led me to. The silence was prominent in that enclosed space. There was something weightier about elevator silences compared to ordinary silences. Maybe it had to do with gravity.

“Um, Hanatori-san,” I said.

She didn’t so much as stir from where she stood in front of the control panel.

Was she planning on staying quiet forever?

“Yes?” she said at last.

“Oh, um. Well. Uh, you sure are fond of Mai, aren’t you?” I laughed awkwardly. That was for sure a one-way ticket to getting her mad at me. She might even punch me in the stomach and yell, “Shut up, you imbecile!”

But all she did was dip her head in a nod. “That I am.”

Umm… Was this a sign that it was okay to carry on the conversation? I mean, I was fine with staying quiet until the universe ended, don’t get me wrong… But it was just, like, you know. It took so much effort for me to start dating Mai, so to have someone who spent so much time around her, like Hanatori-san, harbor bad feelings about me… Well, it wouldn’t feel great. And it’d make Mai unhappy to boot. If we could get along well (and even if we couldn’t!), I hoped to be on civil enough terms that we could chitchat, at the very least. If she had some kind of wrong idea about me, I wanted to clear it up. I wanted her to understand that I was serious about Mai.

Now, what was something the two of us could talk about? Maybe the thing about her being a rabid Mai × Satsu shipper, like I’d heard at the hot spring inn?

“C-can I ask if you like Satsuki-san too?” I asked.

“I do.” Hanatori-san nodded firmly.

So that meant…

“You’re saying that it’d be wonderful if Mai and Satsuki-san dated, huh…?”

“That it would. I won’t give up yet.”

“Gotcha… Wait, what?”

“We’ve arrived.”

The elevator door opened. I looked up at Hanatori-san, still flabbergasted. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“It should be self-evident. My mistress is a wise girl. I trust that before long she will realize what a mistake she has made in carrying on with you.”

“I-I mean, maybe, but…”

She glared at me. Well, no, not really. She just looked at me like normal, but a chill still ran down my spine. Maybe she had the evil eye.

“She will before long,” Hanatori-san insisted. She opened the door with a clack and set off for the living room. I trailed along behind.

She’d nodded with such conviction that now I was anxious. Looking down at the ground as I went, I muttered, “I-I really don’t think you know anything about me, though.”

“Yes, by and large I do not.”

“B-but in spite of that…”

How could she just flat-out say these kinds of things to me? I wanted to ask her, but Hanatori-san had disappeared off somewhere. We were in the middle of a conversation here!

She eventually reappeared carrying some sort of box. Were those the clothes for me to change into? Nah, that wouldn’t have made any sense.

“What a perfect opportunity, venomous pest-san,” she said. “Let me give you a dose of reality.”

“Wait, what?” I said.

“I shall tell you the history of my mistress and I… Our secret memories… You shall understand the difference in our affection for her, as mine has developed over many years.”

Hanatori-san opened the box with a dreamy, far-away look in her eyes. Inside were lots of photo albums, Blu-rays, and other stuff like that. W-wow…

Was Hanatori-san, of all people, really trying to compete with me like a child?!

***

Hanatori Hitoe was born in the remote countryside of Saga prefecture.

She grew up in a village in the middle of nowhere with only three other children in her generation. Her idea of playtime amounted to scampering through the nearby fields and hills. To Hitoe, entertainment was something to be found on TV and the internet—a glamorous world, a glitzy career. As she spent her girlhood in tank tops and shorts year round, Hitoe’s longing for the city life grew stronger by the minute.

When she began college, she clinched her chance to study in the big city and dove headfirst into her dream of working in the entertainment industry. She began working part time as an assistant in a small modeling agency.

Hitoe bent down to introduce herself to her charge, a nine-year-old model. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Hitoe said. “My name is Hanatori.”

She wasn’t used to her heels. Or the suit. Or the big city lingo.

Armed with nothing but a hastily assembled repertoire of tidbits and tricks, she took on the challenge of this new world with trepidation, whereupon she met a blonde princess.

"Hello," said the princess. "My name is Oduka Mai, and it's a pleasure to meet you too."

Hitoe squealed. This girl was the embodiment of everything Hitoe admired—long, silky locks, blue eyes like gemstones, skin as fair as snow. Unlike the rest of humanity and their ape ancestors, this girl seemed to have formed from the tears of a goddess, and the sight of her made Hitoe feel like she was struck by lightning.

At the very same moment, her ministerial soul awakened. The heavens had created a person above all people, and this person now stood directly in front of Hitoe. She knew this girl would go on to captivate multitudes, and thus it was only natural and fair that someone should serve her. It went without saying that this girl's worth far outshone any of the masses.

In some sense, perhaps that moment was love at first sight.

Hitoe and the girl gazed at one another for a few seconds, and then the girl gave Hitoe, stiff with nerves, a quick smile.

"Hanatori-san, will you stay with me?" she asked.

Presently, Queen Rose was still in dire financial straits, with terrible turnover of personnel. This led to a college student like Hitoe being responsible for Mai, if only in a sub-managerial role.

These words from Princess Mai had the effect of making Hitoe kneel on the floor, look straight into Mai's eyes, and declare, "Yes. I will serve you for as long as I live."

No doubt nine-year-old Mai did not fully understand that sentiment, but she looked at Hitoe and smiled in delight.

She responded, Hitoe thought. Her heart kindled with warmth at the prospect of her new role. None could be more sublime.

Ever after, she labored at her job with passion. In recognition of her steadfast work, she was welcomed as Mai's exclusive manager after graduating college. Now her duties extended beyond professional support roles to include taking care of Mai's daily needs. This, she felt, was what made hers a meaningful life.

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"And thus," Hanatori finished, "I am convinced that this is my mission."

"A-ahh, I see," I said.

I watched a Blu-ray of Mai when she was in elementary school as Hanatori-san talked. This wasn't just a matter of having a lot of love for Mai. Her tastes—heck, this woman's entire *life*—revolved around Mai. She cared for Mai as if she were her sister or her own daughter. Well, now I got why a total nobody like me winning Mai's affection could give Hanatori-san cause to complain. Wait a minute, now she was winning me over!

I couldn't stop myself from blurting out, "But you're basically not living life on your own terms at this point!"

Hanatori-san turned to me in surprise.

"Oh, sorry," I mumbled. "That's really impertinent for a first year in high school to say."

"No, but you're quite right," she said.

Was she agreeing with me, kinda?

Opposite Hanatori-san, who held her hand to her chest, the screen

showed itty-bitty Mai wearing a pretty dress as photographers snapped picture after picture of her. It was on a way different scale than the photo shoot I'd had with Kaho-chan, but that went without saying. Her studio was gargantuan and thronged with piles of photography equipment and herds of staff members. In the video, which I'm guessing Hanatori-san recorded on a portable camera as part of her job, there'd occasionally be emotional whispers of her going like, "Oh, mistress… How lovely…" or like "Oh, mistress, you're just like a princess who's flown down to be in the Oduka family…" What was Hanatori, a Mai otaku?!

As I got hung up on the massive discrepancy between Hanatori-san's appearance and behavior, she said, "I wish that my mistress and Koto-sama could have lived together in a blissful honeymoon for all eternity. But I fear that may only be my own selfish desire."

Nah, no need for the "I fear" bit; in my book, it was 500 percent her selfish desire. But I was scared to say that out loud, so I smiled and racked my brains trying to come up with how to make things less awkward.

"Uh, I'm sorry, I guess," I said. "That she ended up with someone like me…"

"As you should be, venomous pest-san."

"Ah. I see you're still calling me that, huh…"

"I must admit that you are the one my mistress has chosen," Hanatori-san said. "Thus, even if you are a venomous pest who used your wiles to seduce my mistress…that does not change the fact that there was never anything I could do about this. If I were to physically eradicate you, then I would only cause her unhappiness."

Hanatori-san lowered her eyes. Seeing a grown woman look this downcast made me feel like I was on unsteady ground. Also, wait—did

that mean she had planned to do away with me…?

"Hanatori-san, you really like Mai, huh…?" I muttered, terrified.

Hanatori-san nodded quietly. "Indeed, I do."

I didn't know a ton about Mai's family situation or anything, but I thought it was nice that she had an adult around who cared about her this much. So…

Just then, the image on TV changed completely. It was still a video of Mai, but she looked a little older than she had before. I was guessing she was in one of her later years of elementary school. She didn't look all that much younger than I did right now, really… She was already about as tall as I was, and her face looked grown-up as well.

The black-haired girl standing next to her was probably some famous model too, I figured. Something about her, like her vibe or her style or whatever, had an amazing power to draw the eye.

Hanatori-san sighed in admiration like a lady standing in front of a famous Rubens painting. "Oh, Koto-sama, how beautiful…"

"Wait, what?" I exclaimed. "You're telling me that's Satsuki-san?!"

She was totally right. It *was* Mai and Satsuki-san. They whispered to one another and giggled together in between the snaps of the shutter. Satsuki-san was still a little kid and lacked the cutting edge in her eyes she had now, the one as sharp as a legendary sword. I felt like I'd never seen Satsuki-san smiling in such a carefree manner before… At any rate, it was stinkin' cute.

"Oh wow, she's adorable," I said. "Oh my god. That's so cute."

"Isn't she? Yes, isn't she?"

I didn't know what Hanatori-san was smirking about, but Satsuki-san was so pretty I had no choice but to agree with her. Like, the difference between this Satsuki-san and the Satsuki-san I knew was wild.

Not only did she and Mai seem thick as thieves, but these two little girls giggling together, ignorant of the depravity of the world… It was like this scene was a sacred artifact that adults were absolutely forbidden to encroach on. I almost expected the words “once upon a time” to flash across the screen…

“This was a period of time in which Koto-sama assisted my mistress with her work,” Hanatori-san said. “It was to help her when she was in low spirits, you see.”

“Oh!” I said. “That’s the thing they told me about when we had the FPS competition.”

“Yes, that is correct. Naturally, ordinary friends could not be allowed to attend a photo shoot, but they allowed her because she was Koto-sama. They immediately attempted to talent scout her, as you can see.”

“Yeah, that’s Satsuki-san all right…” I remembered the dignified figure she’d cut back at the cosplay show. Of course she turned out to be the kind of person doing stuff like that right from the start.

Hanatori-san stared off into space and murmured, with a face as reverent as a believer witnessing the birth of their god, “I don’t believe I shall ever forget that moment for as long as I live.”

“I see…” I said. “It would have been nice if they’d gotten married, huh?”

“Indeed, it would have… Ah, but I haven’t given up hope yet.”

This must have been the thing that broke Hanatori-san’s brain and turned her into a rabid Mai × Satsu shipper. But yeah, I could get why. If I’d met Mai-san, Satsuki-san, or Ajisai-san when we were little kids, I would 100 percent have fallen head over heels for them. As for Kaho-chan? Well, Kaho-chan…was a pal, so…

“I pray that when I am called up to heaven,” Hanatori-san said, “my mistress and Koto-sama will grow wings and lead me there by the hand.”

“That’s kinda wild…”

Now that I looked more carefully, I noticed that there were other child models there too apart from Mai × Satsu. But there was a shocking difference in how little they stood out. It was like me compared to the rest of the Quintet. Man, that must have sucked.

“Now, no more of that,” Hanatori-san said. She ejected the Blu-ray and carefully returned it to its box. I guess it was her treasure chest. “I assume the bath is ready, venomous pest-san.”

“Oh, okay,” I said.

My mood took a hit every time she called me venomous pest-san. Like, yup, that’s me. Just a venomous pest coming in between Mai and Satsuki-san. Sorry for being born.

At any rate, it’d be no bueno if Mai got home while I was borrowing the use of her bathtub, so I decided to just take a quick shower.

“I’ll hop in, then,” I said. “Sorry for all the trouble.”

Hanatori-san brought a full change of clothes, which she must have put together when I wasn’t paying attention. I tried to take them from her, but she just walked right on past me. Well, I guess I could let her show me the way to the bathroom.

“Here it is,” she said.

“Oh,” I said when I opened the door. “Wow, this is surprisingly… normal?”

There was a toilet and sink, plus a bathing area sectioned off by a thick glass door. It kinda reminded me of the bathroom in the hotel Mai and I had stayed at. Given how atypical Mai’s apartment was, I’d figured she’d have a freaking huge tub like the one in that love hotel.

“Okay, excuse me…” I said.

But Hanatori-san still didn’t give me the clothes. Um?

“For the sake of my mistress,” she said, “I cannot allow you to remain unsupervised.”

“Uh, what is that supposed to mean?”

And then, right before my very eyes, Hanatori-san stripped out of

her suit. Hello?!

"What're you doing?!" I cried.

"And thus," she said, loosening her neck tie and acting like this was all totally reasonable, "I shall do the honor of bathing and cleansing you so you do not disgrace yourself in front of my mistress."

"Wha?" I screamed. "Whaaaaat?!"

I gingerly tiptoed into the steamy bathroom. I had a bath towel covering my front, but I was completely exposed from behind. When Hanatori-san stood behind me, I felt, for some inexplicable reason, like my life was in danger.

"What does bathing and cleansing me, uh, entail exactly?" I asked.

Hanatori-san's hair had gotten caught in her shirt when she removed it, so now she had it released from its tight bun. Her black hair was slightly wavy and cloaked her like a shadow, which emphasized how pale she was.

Hanatori-san took the shower nozzle and adjusted the water temperature. As I listened to the fwisssh of the water, I thought about the game I was super into at the moment. Whenever I played on a city map, the inter-fighting in the early stages of the game was ferocious. I wondered if holing up in the outskirts would increase my chances of survival. But in the end, defensive plays wouldn't get you to the top of the leaderboards, even if it did improve your ranking. You got better results in terms of growth from practicing shooting in normal play, which meant that having this black-haired beauty wash me would also eventually pan out in my favo—okay, nope! So much for an escape from reality.

"I mean, I can wash myself, you know!" I said.

I looked over my shoulder and caught a full look at Hanatori-san. Boy, she was a Grown Woman all right. Her thighs were nicely filled out, and while she was pretty thin overall, there was a curviness to her. She wasn't like my mom or any of my teachers, but neither was she anything like the girls my age. It was like…the nakedness of an oneesan, you know? Pretty vivid! Seeing my friends naked was oh-god-worthy, but an older stranger I'd barely even talked to before was plenty oh-god-worthy too. An "oh god" on the oh-god scale. Plus, I felt extra guilty from the fact that I was seeing *Hanatori-san* naked, when up to this point she'd never shown any emotion and acted like a helper robot. Just think, underneath that suit of hers was this sleek nakedness… Nope, my mind was way too deep in the gutter!

"Now, if you'll excuse me," Hanatori-san said.

She covered a body sponge with a gorgeous-smelling soap. Oh thank god. She wasn't going to use her hands like some pervert.

"O-okay…" I said.

Yeah, you know what? If it was like getting your hair washed at a salon, then it wouldn't be so bad. I figured Hanatori-san was treating it all like a job, so I had to do my best to be just as professional about it. Right. Professional.

I slowly opened my bath towel and stood stock-still in front of the wall. I could feel Hanatori-san's hands coming up from behind and reaching for me.

The sponge touched my skin, and I squeaked.

"Is it cold?" she asked.

"Oh, no. It just tickled a little."

"I'll be careful."

The sensation of scrubbing on my skin was waaaaaaaaaay

different than how it felt at home.

“Th-that sponge feels kind of odd,” I said.

“It’s silk,” Hanatori-san told me. “Its small fibers allow it to strip off the smallest bits of dirt, but scrubbing too hard can damage the skin.”

“G-gotcha.”

That explained why she was being so gentle. That feather-like touch was so light I could barely tell if she was making contact or not. As her sponge barely tickled the tips of the fine down on my arm, I could feel some gauge in me rising little by little. This…actually felt good…

In order to alleviate the rising heat in me, I opened my mouth and let out a little moan. It relieved the throbbing that had nowhere else to go. Still, Hanatori-san continued to scrub away at me, keeping up the endless stream of that uneasy feeling.

“U-um… It still really tickles, so that’s why I… Mmm…”

“You’re quite ticklish,” she said.

“Yeah, uh, maybe…?”

With no hesitance whatsoever, Hanatori-san moved the sponge down from my back toward my butt. Eep?!

“U-uh, hey!” I said.

“Could you please be a little quieter?”

“How come I’m the one getting the blame?” I whined.

I bit my lip to hold it in. Wait, hold *what* in?! Listen, this really tickled, okay?

“Would you mind sitting down for a moment?” she asked.

“Sure thing…”

I sat down, feeling exhausted. The moment I parked my butt on this thing—it wasn't a bath mat, more like a bath legless chair (is that a thing?)—I felt a little bit better.

Hanatori-san offered me a bottle of water.

"Th-thanks…" I said.

I put the straw in my mouth and took a sip. This was deadass some princess-level treatment. For some reason, I was sweating all over, which had to be good for my health.

Hanatori-san lifted my leg, and I lost my balance.

"Whoa!" I cried.

"Please excuse me," she said.

"Couldn't you have said that *before* you picked up my leg?!"

She rubbed a mysterious scent all over my leg and then began to work away again with the sponge. I felt like a log being sanded with a plane. *Wait, are you calling my legs logs? Look, I'm not* that *fat, okay?!*

"How does this feel?" Hanatori-san asked.

"It's really embarrassing…" I said.

"You have no cause for concern. I am a certified esthetician, so I have faith in my skin care abilities."

That wasn't the issue!

She lifted one leg, and my position kinda…you know! I tried to turn my thighs inward and bear with it to the best of my ability, but I felt like at any second she'd totally see the parts of me best not shown in polite company. Had I ever suffered such a disgrace before in my life? Not to the best of my knowledge, no!

My abdominal muscles began to quake, and I squeaked.

"Is something wrong?" Hanatori-san asked.

“Y-you scrubbed me down to my toes! I couldn’t help it!”

“I see.”

She might have been a robot bent on finishing her task—she didn’t so much as lift an eyebrow. She just took my other foot. Eep. Once again, she started scrubbing away at the log. It felt really good…

“Wait a sec, why’re you making me this squeaky clean anyway?” I asked. “You’re not going to put me on a plate and serve me up before Mai, are you?”

“What depraved nonsense are you talking now…?”

“Then there’s no need to go this far, right?”

“It isn’t a matter of degree,” she said. “I am only doing this because it would be an insult to my mistress for you to meet her in such filth.”

Guh. I mean, I did want to be nice and clean all the time too, so there was that going for her.

Hanatori-san finally finished washing both legs.

I had to catch my breath. “I-I survived…”

“Now lay back slowly, please.”

“Okay…”

I guess there was more to Hanatori-san’s beauty salon treatment. I reclined back on the chair and stretched my legs out. I had the feeling that, rather than fighting with her, it was wisest to cooperate and get it over with as soon as possible.

“Your arms, please.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She rubbed me down from my biceps to the backs of my hands with the same gentle motions. I think my arms were even more sensitive

than my legs or my back. My breathing was starting to quicken again. I really did feel like she was preparing me for cooking. Once I was all done, was she going to serve me up with salt and cream for Mai as an afterschool snack? Freaking Oduka Hannibal over here…

Hanatori-san finished both arms, and I was finally free.

"Now I will lower the back rest," she said.

"Huh?"

Well, it was a legless bath chair after all. I could recline it and lie down completely. I'd never laid back and stared at the ceiling of a bathroom before, so that made for a new experience.

"Now, pardon me," she said.

"Huh?"

She placed a bath towel over my eyes, once again just like at a beauty salon.

And then there was a squish… Hm? I felt some kind of sensation on my chest. Oh, no way… Was she washing my front now?!

"They don't do this at salons!" I said.

"Yes, for I shouldn't think one is naked at a salon."

"Well, duh, but that's not the point!"

While naked, blindfolded, and flat on my back, I was completely vulnerable. If Hanatori-san wanted to kill me, she could have done so at any moment.

When her sponge touched my boobs, I just barely caught myself seconds before I screamed. Then the sponge glided from my cleavage down to my stomach. Eep. It made my fingers curl and my legs fidget. This felt way, waaay better than when she first washed my back, and that made it all the harder to keep quiet. Ohhh god.

"U-um, Hanatori-san…are you done yet?" I asked.

“It will be just a little longer,” she said. “Please be patient.”

“O-okay…”

Oh god, no, this was too much. I was worn out. Nooo freaking way.

“Ahh,” I moaned. “Ahh.” I breathed heavily. I couldn’t take it any longer, and that moaning accidentally slipped out.

I felt so hot. I wasn’t even in the bath yet, but my whole body felt hot and steamy. And now I was almost getting some massage kind of thing.

“Th-this feels so good…” I said. “N-no, Hanatori-san. No, not there…”

My mind had gone blank. My voice sounded far away even to my own ears.

I panted again. “Oooh…”

In my head, I repeated for dear life, “This isn’t sexy, this *isn’t* sexy,” like it was the Buddhist nenbutsu prayer. But for all my efforts, you couldn’t deny that my voice sounded pretty sensual.

Ohhh god. It felt like there was something tingling under my skin. I was miserable. I couldn’t tell anything since my eyes were covered, but I had the fear that something awful was happening all over me.

“Th-that’s too much, that’s too—no more, no more, I said… I can’t handle this any longer, Hanatori-saaan…”

I hadn’t meant to, but now it sounded like I was begging for it. Some part of my brain swore that I could *never* let anyone at school see me like this.

Suddenly, light shone into my eyes.

“Oh…” I said.

“All done, venomous pest-san.” Hanatori-san peered down at me.

“O-oh, okay… Gah!”

Shocked, I hurried to wipe my mouth. Sure enough, I was drooling.

“I-it’s not what it looks like!” I said. “It’s not that it made me feel good or anything!”

“Oh? It has been quite some time since I’ve exercised these skills, so I’m pleased to see you enjoyed the experience so much.”

“No, that’s not what happened!”

Hanatori-san ran hot water from the shower head. She raised my head slightly and washed me down as I lay there. It was my first time getting scrubbed and having hot water run all over me while lying down, and both were odd experiences. Not to mention it pissed me off how darn good it all felt.

“W-well, if that’s as bad as it gets,” I said, “I could handle this sort of thing any day! It tickled, sure, but that was only right at the start. I was just acting like you got the better of me. You’re not so bad as all that, Hanatori-san!”

Hanatori-san looked down on me as I lay there naked and gave me a vague, “Hmm,” in reply.

Then she almost apologetically covered me with a little towel that went from my boobs to my lower body. Hm? She squeezed some oil-looking thing into her hands and rubbed them together.

“Very well,” she said. “Then I shall continue with an oil massage.”

“H-hold on!”

Hanatori-san made no acknowledgment and loomed over me.

“Hold on already!”

***

I heard a door open and then running footsteps.

“Why, hello. I’m sorry for being late. You must have been waiting for quite some ti—” Mai began as she came into the living room, but then the smile froze on her face.

I forced myself to smile at her as I sat innocuously on a dining room chair. “W-welcome home, Mai.”

“Welcome home, mistress,” Hanatori-san said with a polite nod of her head. “I have dinner ready. Would you like to eat now?”

“A-ah, yes, thank you, Hanatori-san.”

Mai took off her coat, and Hanatori-san accepted it from her like it was second nature. She bowed and then left the room in order to serve dinner.

Mai sat down across from me in her own dining room chair with a rosy, beaming smile. “You surprised me,” she said.

“D-did I?”

“Yes. You look absolutely adorable.”

She reached out and took my hand. I was wearing the clothes Hanatori-san had picked out for me following my bath, which, of course, were certainly no exercise clothes or anything of the sort. It was a dress that Mai hadn’t ever worn and that had been carefully stored in the closet for years. I was a bit worried about how it’d fit, but I guess it looked good no matter who wore it. Hanatori-san went and coordinated a whole outfit for me, down to the nines, and even did my hair. That’s not to mention the full body massage too. My entire body felt relaxed and springy. Was I, by any chance, *cute* now…? Nope, nope, nope, I couldn’t be conceited. Because Mai would call me cute within moments anyway!

“You’re so cute, Renako,” she said.

See?

“Yeah, comparatively speaking, I’m a lot cuter than I’ve ever been,” I said, “but you must see tons of cuties and hotties all the time. So objectively speaking, I’m not that cute.”

“You’re lovely,” she said. “You are indeed very cute, Renako.”

“Look, you wouldn’t have dated me if you were just in this for my body!” I said.

I glared back at her in embarrassment, and Mai just nodded and said, “That’s true.” *Don’t agree with me!*

“You see, all the girls I’m referring to are models,” Mai explained. “Each and every one has a BMI between 14 and 16. They scrutinize every morsel of food they consume and take painstaking care to maintain their bodies.”

“Gotcha,” I said. “Well, then there’s no freaking way I can compete!”

I had no qualms about admitting my defeat. I mean, I ate fried chicken and pastries and stuff all the time.

Mai smiled. “Yet that does not guarantee that all those girls are so lovely. I much prefer you over all the others. Thank you for dressing up for me.”

“S-sure thing… I mean, it was pretty much all Hanatori-san’s doing, but yeah…”

“I’m happy. Truly, I am.”

Smiling all the while, Mai stroked my hand. Urgh. Well, if it made her this happy, then I guess I could put up with the embarrassment it took to get here… Was I being brainwashed? No, wait—when was I going to stop being so weird about her? I needed to! Actually! Tell her

that I loved her!

"Urrrrrrrrrrgh," I groaned.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. "You suddenly clutched your head in great pain."

"I'm trying to smoke out my inner demons right now," I explained. "But the demons have by and large become one with me, so I'm taking damage at the same time too."

"I-I see. I'm not sure I understand, but that sounds dreadful."

While Mai looked put off, Hanatori-san brought in dinner. I thought she'd come in pushing a trolley like in a hamburger restaurant, but instead she used a normal tray. She set the table for Mai and I and then served generous helpings of beef stew onto our deep dishes.

"Wow, that looks good," I said.

But it was a heck of a lot less glitzy than I'd imagined meal time in the Oduka household to be. I was positive they'd wheel out a whole roast pig or something. Well, no. Mai was a model, after all. She wouldn't eat that much.

"Bon appetit," said Hanatori-san.

"Thanks!"

I was famished after all that exercise earlier. I figured I'd better dig in before the delicious smells made my stomach growl.

"This looks good, huh, Mai?" I said.

"Yes, I'm sure it'll be scrumptious. I guarantee."

I dipped my spoon in the stew. It had lots of broccoli and potatoes, and the carrots made for a pretty touch of orange. This was probably beef shank, I figured. It seemed nice and soft, as if it'd been stewed for a long time.

I lifted a spoonful. It was very hot, so I blew on it a good deal

before bringing the spoon to my lips.

Mm!

"This is great!" I said.

It was way different than the stew we had at my place! Like, the flavors were so rich! Or strong? Flavorful? There was…depth to it! Yeah, it tasted like it'd perk you right up.

"Hey, Mai, this is awesome!" I said. "Hanatori-san's cooking is the bomb."

Hey, wait a sec. If I married Mai, did that mean I could get food like this *every day*? Mai had already asked me to marry her, but maybe she was going to sway my heart from a different angle by showing me in no uncertain terms what my life could be like after marriage. Plus, I could get massages courtesy of Hanatori-san too, right? And rides in the limo. I could live the life of a princess of a wealthy nation. This was the kind of thing everyone dreamed of.

Mai put a hand to her mouth and giggled. What was that for?

"I was just reminded of when Hanatori-san first came to live with us," Mai explained.

Hanatori-san protested, a little flustered, "Mistress!"

"At the time, her cooking repertoire was still quite limited, and as this was the only thing she could make, she made beef stew in a slow cooker every single day. Do you remember that, Hanatori-san?"

"I apologize for such an inconvenience," Hanatori-san said as she hung her head. She bowed to try to hide her face, but I could see her cheeks reddening anyway.

"So even Hanatori-san had a phase like that, huh?" I said.

"She did," Mai said. "Now that I think about it, there was her driving too. She used to go white as a sheet whenever she drove through

narrow suburban roads. She grew so upset over it that she contemplated going back to driving school to relearn."

"I beg your pardon, mistress."

"Oh no, you misunderstand me," said Mai. "I mean it as a compliment. I'm grateful for how much effort you've always put in for me."

"You are too kind," said Hanatori-san.

You know, this was really…nice. Especially given the stories about Hanatori-san's devotion that I'd heard earlier. The stew tasted great, and Mai and Hanatori-san were both having a good time. So yeah. It felt super pleasant.

Mai smiled dreamily. "You know," she said, "I have the most curious feeling right now."

"Uh…how so?" I asked as I continued to shovel down stew. (I was being a total mood killer.)

"Why, having you here and sharing a dinner with you that Hanatori-san made—it feels almost like we're a family."

"Mai?" I said.

That was kinda… I mean, I ate at home like this all the time. Mom and Dad were there, and my sister and I always recounted the stuff that happened at school that day. It was something I always took for granted, something that'd been like this for ages.

I stopped spooning up stew and looked at Mai. I couldn't really tell what she was thinking, but she wore a peaceful look on her face… Was she tired from work, maybe?

"U-uh, yeah," I said. And then, just to be on the safe side, I added, "But you know, um. I'm still not thinking about marrying you, okay?"

Mai grinned. "Yes, I understand. Nevertheless, thank you."

She was the one who was giving me yummy food and letting me wear her pretty clothes, and yet *she* was thanking *me*.

Mai rested her elbows on the table, laced her hands together, and smiled. “That reminds me. What if we try living together first? Oh, but of course I’ll introduce myself to your parents when we go to ask for permission. Why, I’m so nervous.”

“Um, no?!”

“It’s quite all right. They may reject us at first on the grounds that it’s too sudden, but I’m sure I’ll bring them around. I’ll make both of our dreams come true, you see.”

“Uh, but my dream is just to have a chill life, thank you very much!”

The sudden tempo change in this conversation really threw me for a loop. Besides, I had a feeling that, even if Mai didn’t try all that hard, my parents would give her the OK right off the bat. It was less that my parents were particularly easy to wheedle and more that the figure Mai cut was just that impressive. At the very least, I knew my sister would be all over the idea. Maybe I had too few people on my side here… Well, I had a feeling Hanatori-san would be on my side on this particular issue, but I also couldn’t imagine her having the heart to oppose Mai. So in the end, it was up to me to protect myself!

“Look, I’m not the kinda girl who’s so easy you can win her over with a single meal,” I said.

“Then perhaps my next effort should be to set up a game room for you.”

“Could you legit not? That’s my weakness! I don’t want to go over to your house and spend all the time I want playing games on top-of-the-line machines with high refresh rate monitors. I’d end up practically living at your place!”

Mai smiled as she watched me rage.

I only came over to her place to hang out, eat dinner, and go home. That's all it was, but Mai seemed happier than ever. Maybe, I thought, it wouldn't be such a bad idea to do this kind of thing again sometime.

Wait, was this in some sense the first date at her house since we'd started going out? Nah, nah, nah, no way. I was just going to play a quick fighting game with her after dinner and then go home, that's all. It really wasn't that big of a deal, right? Right?

It turned out that Hanatori-san took me home too.

"Thanks for everything today," I said. "The food, and, um, the clothes and all."

"Not at all," she said. "I will come collect them later when the opportunity presents itself."

On the way home, Hanatori-san drove me in a small black car as opposed to the limo. I figured it was the one she commuted to work in. It seemed like a car a person actually used, and so I felt a little awkward sitting in the back seat.

She pulled up in front of my house. I bowed, holding a paper bag containing my workout clothes and my basketball. Then, as if she thought I was about to run away just like that, Hanatori-san rolled down the car window.

"Do please continue to stay good friends with my mistress," she said. She…was smiling, ever so slightly.

"Are you sure?" I said. "That we should stay friends, I mean."

"What, is this a joke? The flower is fond of the venomous pest and thus my hands are tied. No?"

She said it in the same emotionless way as everything else, but…it gave off a slightly different impression.

Sorta… I think.

Anyway, I thought I'd gotten clear of her "Do whatever it takes to stamp them out!" attitude. Thank god. But I didn't know if I'd done anything to prompt such a change in opinion. I mean, she'd looked like a super cute big sister when she was talking about Mai. If only she always looked like that, then she sure would have been a heck of a lot easier to talk to.

"At dinner tonight," Hanatori-san began, "my mistress was almost…"

"Hm?" I said.

"Oh, nothing."

She snapped her professional face back on, but I still had a question for her. It had been stuck in my throat for ages like a tiny bone. Or heck, not even that tiny—more like the skull of a giant man-eating shark.

Nervously, I said, "Hanatori-san, can I ask what you think?"

"About what?"

"The, um. The two-timing thing."

"Oh, that." Then, completely opposite of what I expected her to do, she giggled. "I don't mind a whit."

"Uh…W-wait, you don't?"

"I do not."

What the… Her answer was so unexpected that, for a moment, I was at a loss for words. It was like steeling your courage to walk into class on the day you're supposed to get a test back that you didn't think you did so hot on, only to find that the teacher was out. It felt like a

letdown. Hanatori-san cared for Mai so greatly, she should have considered me a no-good piece of work. I thought it'd be a huge challenge to win Hanatori-san's approval, but it was one I had to undertake. It'd have been a hard thing for me to declare that I'd make Hanatori-san happy too, but I had to do it at some point. But for her to acknowledge me as good enough for Mai right off the bat was, well, a good thing…I guess?

But then, still smiling, Hanatori-san completely dashed all my hopes by saying, "I know it's merely a groundless rumor, after all."

Uh. Um? "Uh," I said.

"Why, there surely can't be anyone who would dare two-time my mistress. So all those rumors circulating the internet are simply too preposterous. You shouldn't let that ridiculous gossip get to you. You must simply continue to improve yourself day after day for my mistress."

"Um…" I laced my fingers together and asked, "About that… Hypothetically, um. If I *was* two-timing her…what would you do?"

Hanatori-san chuckled elegantly. And then, as if that were as impossible as trillion yen coins suddenly falling from the sky, she said, "Penal code article 199."

And then, saying no more, she drove away.

Japanese Penal Code Article 199: A person who kills another person is punished by the death penalty or imprisonment for life or for a definite term of not less than 5 years.

***

I went back to my room and burrowed myself under my blanket. I didn't think I'd committed a dire enough crime to deserve death! Right? Right?!

***

Surprise surprise, I had nightmares.

It started off with a scene where Ajisai-san dumped me, with no prior warning at all. "Sorry, Rena-chan," she said, "but I just don't like you anymore."

Gotcha, I thought. Well, there was no fighting it if she didn't have feelings for me any longer. Friends can connect just by having common interests or stuff to talk about, but dating someone's a matter of romantic feelings. If you didn't like them that way anymore, then so long, dating. It really sucked.

But that meant that Mai and I were just a couple, then. Mai told me, "We'll still be together." And because she liked me, we dated. QED.

I went over to her house as usual, and then after some quality time (???) in bed, Hanatori-san called out to me just as I was about to go home. She pointed straight at me.

"You were two-timing my mistress, were you not?" she demanded.

I denied it with every fiber of my being. I wasn't being insincere, but I still had no choice—I didn't want to die. My desire to live trumped everything.

Realizing that the jig was up and Hanatori-san knew everything anyway, I groveled before her and surrendered my pride à la Kaho-chan. I also busted out every excuse in the book. It wasn't my fault! It was them who seduced me! I did nothing wrong, I tell you!

Hanatori-san looked down on me like I was an unsalvageable piece of trash. At some point, she'd gotten ahold of a chainsaw and now brandished it aloft. Why a chainsaw? It must have come from the game I was playing before I went to bed. I kept screaming: I did nothing wrong!

As if to drown out my voice, the chainsaw slashed me in two. Game Over.

You can't just wake up from a dream like that and be all chipper, going, "Heya, everybody!" Instead, I oozed my way into the classroom.

"Hi, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said.

"H-hi!" My voice came out louder than it needed to be.

I decided to grin to dispel my anxiety. I couldn't look uneasy in front of Ajisai-san, after all.

Ajisai-san stared at me as I put down my backpack and took a seat.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Um, well."

God, she was so cute today… Wait, I was getting sidetracked.

How would Ajisai-san's little brothers look at me if they found out I was two-timing their big sister? Do you think Kouki-san and Kippei-san, after I'd played video games with them and everything, would call me "Loser!" and "Butthead!"? Maybe even her mom, who'd seemed so kind when she'd come to pick Ajisai-san up that one time, would come after me with a chainsaw too.

"I want to work harder for you," I said.

"Huh?"

I wanted to discover what it meant to live a meaningful life like Hanatori-san…

"Did you bring your textbook today?" I asked. "What about your homework; did you do that? Are you missing anything?"

“Uh, not really,” she said. “I think I’m okay.”

“Gotcha… Hey, if you ever have trouble at home and need a place to spend the night, you know you can always come over to my place, right?”

“Y-yeah, I do, but…um…?”

I wanted to give her more advantages to dating me… I liked seeing Ajisai-san living happy and healthy, but I didn’t want to be cut in half by a chainsaw. If Ajisai-san had been the sort to never be happy without me, then I would have done anything and everything for her. But Ajisai-san was perfectly capable of being happy on her own, which ultimately meant she didn’t need my help. Which meant I couldn’t give her more advantages. In order to make things better for her, I had to make things worse for her first! This making people happy thing was some tough business! Wait, no. I couldn’t imagine making her unhappy. That’d make dating me *less* advantageous. I decided to try thinking up some other method.

“What about if I gave you a compliment a day?” I suggested.

“Um, that’d be nice, but…?” Ajisai-san tilted her head, still not getting why I was doing this at all.

In the face of such cuteness, I realized how foolish I’d just been. “No!” I cried. “It’s so obvious that you’re adorable that calling you cute would just be stating a fact. That won’t make you happy!”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Ajisai-san, your pencil case is so cute!”

I pointed to her pencil case, one of those ones with fictional characters on it. I wanted to branch out on my complimenting game as much as possible.

Ajisai-san smiled and nodded. “Yeah! Actually, the kiddos gave me

this as thanks for all the help I give them. Talk about unexpected, huh?"

"Oh, I see," I said.

Perfect. Now this was a Perfect Teatime. I could hear the sound of her affection meter rising. Also, it was kinda nice to hear that things were good between her and her brothers.

Mai came over and greeted us. "Good morning."

Before I could say hi back, I noticed someone behind her and went "Urk."

"Enough is enough," the other girl snapped. "Have you given the matter any thought yet, Oduka-san?"

"You may ask me all you want," Mai said, "but it won't make a difference. To begin with, I'm hardly what you would call the leader of the group."

"Lies! You are clearly the leader of the Quintet, any way you slice it!"

Ajisai-san and I exchanged looks as Mai shrugged.

"Another quarrel with Takada-san…" Ajisai-san whispered to me.

"Yup," I whispered back.

Would Takada-san lay off it already? I mean, we already had the teams picked for the inter-class athletics competition and everything. Just give it a rest, girl.

Takada-san's eyes swiveled in our direction. Eeep.

"And a good morning to you, Amaori-san and Sena-san! Say, did I hear correctly that Amaori-san was picked for the basketball team?"

She charged over like an invader. Eeep!

"U-uh, well, yeah…" I said.

"Why, then let us have a showdown!" she said. "For you see, we

all chose to play basketball too. Surely that will make it a fair fight, no?"

"Um…"

Not really, because Mai and Ajisai-san were both on the softball team. If Class B won under those conditions, would that be enough to placate Takada-san?

"You know, Takada-san," Ajisai-san said, gently trying to pacify her, "could we maybe save this for later? I feel like getting the whole class involved will make a lot of trouble for everyone else."

That was dangerous, Ajisai-san! If getting targeted made her unhappy, didn't this give me a chance to offer her more perks to dating?

But, of course, Takada-san didn't listen. "That will keep you on the run from me forever, will it not? It is best to compete in a class event and thus broadcast to the entire school which of us is superior. My word…"

Takada-san looked around the room and put her hands on her hips. "With every one of my suggestions, you take every opportunity to duck out. Class A is nothing but a bunch of cowards!"

The class fell completely silent. A silence like that would have sunk emotionally vulnerable me in one hit, but Takada-san just put her hand to her mouth and smirked. "No response, really? Very well, I'll take my leave. There's no point in wasting my precious time in the morning on your sort."

She brandished her hands as she made to leave, and just then, someone spoke up.

"Hey now," that someone said. "I'm not cool with the way you talked to us."

"Hm?" said Takada-san.

The objector was a girl. And that girl's name? Amaori Renako. I

mean, I couldn't just let a little upstart like this trounce the Quintet! Everyone here was so nice, just doing their own thing as they lived out their daily lives chasing their dreams, so it was just that they didn't go fighting people. The Quintet couldn't lose! And it pissed me off to let her get the last word!

"The Quintet will win when it comes to a real fight," I told her.

"Oh? Words are cheap without the actions to back them up," she challenged.

Then two other voices piped up, agreeing with me.

"Sh-she's right!" said one. "The Quintet will win for sure!"

"Uh-huh," said the other. "They'd never lose to the likes of Class B."

Those were Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san, both watching the fuss from a distance: the Quintet's fan girls!

Still, Takada-san frowned in displeasure and waved a hand as if repelling their watching eyes. "If you wish to fight fair and square, then come to Class B. I don't care a wit about your yapping at me."

"Ah!"

Takada-san knocked something off a desk and onto the floor where it struck the ground hard. It was…Ajisai-san's pencil case.

"Oh!"

And then, to make matters worse, Takada-san stepped on it as hard as she could, producing a SNAP!

"I-I'm sor—" She began to say reflexively, but before she could finish, I yelled, "That was Ajisai-san's pencil case!"

Mai rounded on Takada-san. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Flustered, Takada-san looked down at Ajisai-san sitting there all

dejected and stuttered, “Oh, no, I, uh.”

And then. And THEN. She put her hand to her mouth and roared with laughter like a villainess. “*That* shabby thing is your pencil case? Why, I mistook it for a piece of trash lying on top of your desk, so it’s hardly any wonder that I failed to notice it and then stepped upon it. After all, it was only garbage!”

The class fell dead quiet, with Takada-san’s laughter the only sound in the room. Oh, that little…

Then Ajisai-san said in a heartbroken voice, “Oh… That was the pencil case they gave me…” She gently kneeled to the ground and picked up the pencil case with the shoe print on it. “It’s not a piece of garbage.”

Everyone heard her whimper. Then, from all across the classroom, people said, “Ajisai-san…”

“Sena-chan…”

“Sena…”

“Ajisai-san…”

“Not our class idol…”

“How could they do this to her…?”

“Oh, Sena-san…”

All of Class A was of one mind on this issue, and I felt their strong determination urging me on. So I said, “We accept.”

“Pardon?” Takada-san said.

I pointed at her with all my might. “Fine! We accept your challenge! We’re going to see who’s better fair and square with basketball. And if we win, you’re all going to apologize to Ajisai-san a ton for what you did!”

For a moment there, Takada-san looked daunted. Then she said,

“A-all right, very well. Why, this is exactly what I was hoping for!”

“Takada-san,” Mai said. She came up to stand next to me. “I care not if you loathe me or bear enmity against me, for I’m quite used to that, you see. But I cannot condone you using that hatred as an excuse to hurt my friends.”

Mai’s voice sounded angrier than I’d ever heard it, and Takada-san was at a loss for words. “V-very well. Very well! Good, it seems I’ve manipulated your weaknesses well. All according to plan! Well now, I shall be looking forward to the day of our competition. You’ll get what’s coming to you, just you wait!”

Takada-san hurried out, all but speedwalking.

Still cradling her trodden-on pencil case, Ajisai-san looked up at us in worry. “Um, guys.”

“Yes, I know, Ajisai.” Mai took Ajisai’s hand. “Let us teach those girls a lesson so that nothing like this will ever happen again. They will learn where they stand in relation to us, and I promise we will make you feel better.”

“Oh, Mai-chan…”

And then Ajisai-san looked at me. I said nothing. I slowly came back to my senses as the heat of my anger dissipated. Hiding my trembling hands behind my back, I nodded as hard as I could even though I was as white as a sheet.

“Sure thing,” I said. “Just leave it to us!”

I’d gotten way too carried away when she’d roused me up, and I’d accidentally said something ridiculous!

However, our class undeniably came together in that moment. It didn’t matter if you were a guy or a girl—one look at Ajisai-san’s sad

face, and you seethed with hatred toward Class B. The inter-class athletics competition may have started out as just an ordinary school event, but now it was a battle we could not afford to lose.

Group Chat Name: 5déesses (4)
Part 3

Queen: …

Queen: …

Star Lily: Great job, Himi-chan!

Crane-chan: You show your foes no mercy. Even if you are on my side, I must say, you terrify me.

miki: Miki miki!

Star Lily: And that was an especially good choice to go after Sena Ajisai!

Crane-chan: Yes, just as I said before.

Star Lily: She's always like "Ooh, I'm on eeeeveryone's side," and plays nice with everybody.

Star Lily: She's won over all the boys AND girls in Class A, and now she pushes them around like they're her servants.

Crane-chan: Just as I suspected…

Star Lily: And you wanna know what I think? Or like, I just have a hunch about it.

Star Lily: I think *she's* the ringleader.

Crane-chan: ?!

Star Lily: There's far more to her than meets the eye.

Crane-chan: Nonsense. She looks like she couldn't hurt a fly.

Star Lily: That's all a front.

Star Lily: In her heart of hearts, she's evil as can be.

Star Lily: I bet her favorite pastime is to steal another girl's man and then ditch 'im.

Star Lily: In that same way, she destroys the relationships of those around her, approaches those who are alone under the guise of being a supporter, and worms her way past their defenses straight into their hearts. She does this enough, and that's what's gotten her the popularity she has today.

Crane-chan: How dreadful!

Crane-chan: Is she the shadow leader of the Quintet?

Star Lily: Exactly.

Star Lily: But we're in luck, 'cause we got someone who'd go after anyone relentlessly.

Star Lily: Right, Himi-chan?

Queen: …

Queen: …Right, of course!

Chapter 3:
Even If I Try My Best, There's Still No Freaking Way Things'll Work Out

I SAT UP STRAIGHT and held out a thousand-yen bill. In wheedling tones, I tried to coax my actual sister, "Oh, Haruna-chan… Would you be willing to teach me how to play basketball?"

"What the?" she said.

Thanks to the hubbub from the other day, Class A was now all of one mind. (By the way, Ajisai-san's pencil case wasn't noticeably damaged apart from the footprint on it, thank god. Probably something to do with divine protection.) Now, all that was left was to win and avenge Ajisai-san…and therein lay the problem. According to what Kaho-chan had heard from kids in Class B, their basketball team was made up of all five members of Takada-san's posse. And all of them seemed pretty athletic.

On our side, we had Satsuki-san and Kaho-chan, but then there was also Hirano-san, Hasegawa-san, and me. To be blunt, at our current skill level, this would be one tough fight. I'd brought up the idea of calling Mai and Ajisai-san back and going in with the full Quintet crew, but a sudden roster change would be detrimental to the softball team. I'm sure that wasn't what Ajisai-san wanted.

That meant that the basketball team had to train extra hard ASAP, but I was the only member who didn't have a club or a part-time job to keep them busy. Thus, I had no choice but to take the initiative and practice—which was why I was bowing to my sister.

"A class athletics competition, huh?" she said. "And you're doing

all this for Ajisai-senpai? Okay, I get the picture, but I dunno."

She looked away from me. Come to think of it, ever since our recent argument, she'd basically been treating me like normal. But sometimes she got noticeably quiet, like this. Had she found out about the two-timing thing? I trembled in fear every time the thought crossed my mind.

"Y-you don't know?" I prompted.

"Oh, I mean, like, I play badminton, right? I'm no good at basketball."

"Okay, but still! All I'm asking is for you to practice with me a little."

"Why can't you ask one of your school buddies?" my sister began to ask, but then she hurried to cover her mouth. "I'm sorry. I know you don't have any friends."

"Um, I totally do! I'm actually pretty popular in class, thank you very much!"

My sister returned my desperate assertion with an unfeeling look. The thing is, if I had any friends I felt comfortable asking, I wouldn't have needed to cough up money to beg my sister for training, so my argument was dead in the water from the outset. Alas, poor argument-chan. She wasn't breathing…

"Well, I can't do it every day," my sister said. "Only if club gets out early and I don't have anything else going on."

"Thank you, Haruna-chan! I'm so glad you grew up such a good kid. I love you!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

In an attempt to appeal to her sisterly love, I made to take back the thousand-yen bill, but she snatched it out of my hands. Darn it! I

watched helplessly as my bill disappeared into her wallet.

Like a character in an RPG prompting, “Are you sure?” right before an important decision, my sister asked once again, “But you know I’m really not any good at it at all, right?”

“You’re really good!”

Gobsmacked, I watched the basketball swish through the hoop. My sister and I had come to my usual park.

“Huh? No, not really,” she said.

Dressed in workout clothes with her hair tied back in a high ponytail, my sister picked up the ball from where it had fallen and showed off some complex, two-handed dribbling like it was nothing. “Hup,” she said and launched into a jump shot. Once again, the ball got sucked into the hoop.

“No, you’re freaking incredible!” I insisted.

“Nah, nah, nah. I just play with my friends before practice and stuff, that’s all.”

Her voice didn’t have any of that usual “Oh, me? Nah, I totally suck (but I’m fishing for compliments)” obnoxiousness, so she must have really meant it. Could she just do anything when it came to sports? Why, oh why, had I ended up with such sucky genes?

“Wait a sec,” I said. “Do you think my talent for sports is sealed away by magic or something?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

My illustrious little sister suddenly passed the ball to me. I panicked and caught it.

“Honestly,” she said, “how you use your body mostly just comes down to training. Pretty much anyone can do okay at a sport if they

really work hard at it."

"Gotcha," I muttered to myself. "So it's like if someone plays a ton of one FPS, and they're at the point where their aim is perfect and they have a good ability to read a situation and judge their opponents' mindsets. And then even if they go try another game, they'll already have a lot of experience going into it and they'll be able to fly up the ranking ladder in no time."

"You sound like a weirdo, motormouth," my sister pointed out.

Ugh. Sorry. Anyway, that meant…

"If the other team are all sporty girls, that means they'll be as good as you, Haruna!"

"Uh, yeah?"

I couldn't help it. I screamed, "So there's no freaking way I can win! (No 'unless…'!)"

The inter-class athletics competition was a little under two weeks away, and I couldn't see a path to overtaking my sister in that time.

"Does that mean your team's at an overwhelming disadvantage?" she asked.

"Uh…I'm not sure, but probably."

"Hmm." My sister crossed her arms, looking serious.

I was fascinated by how gallant she was being. Haruna rarely let her guard down around me at home, but I figured this serious expression she wore now was the same sort she used when guiding her kouhais at school. Don't tell me. Was she popular? Hey now.

"Basketball's a five-on-five team game, right?" she said. "If the other guys are all newbies too, then I think you guys could just barely pull it off even if they're all better on an individual basis. Give me just one sec."

“By all means,” I said, accidentally slipping into formality.

My sister sure was someone you could depend on in a pinch, huh? It felt kind of pathetic to admit it as her older sister, but I really felt grateful to have her as an ally.

My sister made a phone call to someone; maybe she was calling a buddy in the basketball club or something. She had a lot of friends, right?

With nothing better to do, I had just started to practice shooting when I heard someone shout “Oh!” from the edge of the sports area. A girl marched up to me, her shoulders stiff with rage. W-wait a sec. Was this who I thought it was?

“Oneesan-senpai!” she demanded.

“Gah, Serara-chan!”

The famous tween cosplayer Serara-chan scowled even further. “It’s *Seira*, okay? Get it right!”

“S-sorry,” I said. “Anyway, what’re you doing here?”

Seira-san was wearing a set of workout clothes with shorts that showed off her legs. She looked really cute.

“Haruna-chan sent me a message telling me to come play basketball with her all of a sudden. I haven’t been all that active recently, so I figured why not? And here I am.”

“Gotcha. Well, you sure are cute even in exercise clothes. I guess that’s because you’re a cosplayer.”

“Duh!” Seira-san grinned and flashed me a quick pose.

“Cute!”

She giggled. “You think?”

At the Makuhari summit, I’d been dolled up in cosplay too, so I hadn’t paid a ton of attention to her. But now, seeing her in her usual

clothes, I realized that Seira-chan was a real cutie pie. She was working with some good source material.

“Also, could you cut it out?” she said, puffing her cheeks in a pout. “Haruna doesn’t know about my hobby, ’member?”

“Oh, right! Sorry.”

She let me off the hook. “Yeah, no worries. It’s nbd.” That was nice of her. “We’ll just let bygones be bygones, even if you did backstab me. I’m the cutest right now, after all, so there’s no need to be hung up on it.”

“Ah, gotcha… But you know, I’m still sorry. I wasn’t trying to trick you. It was just a matter of first-come, first-serve. If you’d asked me first, I probably would have helped you out too.”

“It’s whatever,” she said. “I don’t care anymore.”

“Moon-san told me you cried after they announced the judging results, right? I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Look, are you trying to start a fight or what?!” Seira-san lashed out at me for being too inept at bringing up conversational topics, her face bright red. She grabbed me by the collar. Eeep. She was gorgeous.

“I-I’m not!” I said. “I was trying to cheer you up! And I thought you said it was whatever.”

“Don’t tick me off and then nitpick what I say!”

“I-I-I’m sorry… I’m just not that good at carrying on conversations, that’s all…”

Her shoulders heaving with her heavy breathing, Seira-san let me go. “I’m not upset about how it turned out,” she declared. “But that’s because I’m gonna win next time, just you wait and see. I’m still on the road to victory, and this is just a checkpoint. So you’d better get an autograph from me before it’s too late, Oneesan-senpai! ’Cause they’ll be

going for one billion yen before long!”

She pointed right at me. I knew she was just bluffing, but the fact that she felt good enough to show this kind of tenacity was a relief. It was nice to see kids chasing their dreams and working hard with such strong feelings.

“In return,” she said, “I’m gonna beat you to a pulp today in b-ball. Hope you’re ready to get dunked on.”

“P-please go easy on me!”

My sister came back over to us, her phone call finished.

“Heyyyy, Seira,” she said.

“’Sup, Haruna.”

The two tweens exchanged their girly (I guess?) greetings. I could really feel the extroversion on a different level from how it manifested in the Quintet. This place was getting so full of extroversion it was suffocating.

“Anyway, I’ll start off by coming up with a strategy, Oneechan,” my sister said. “And then I’ll show it to you later.”

“Thank you so much.” I pressed my hands together in worship. Truly, I was getting my money’s worth here. It paid off to have a little sister who could outshine me.

“And did you say a friend of yours is coming?” my sister asked.

“Yeah, she’ll probably be here soon,” I said. “What about you? Is it just Seira-san today?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that there were three of you when you had friends over during summer break.”

There was Haruna, Seira-san, and that other girl. Bobbed Hair, the one whose eyes lit up when we talked about Queen Rose. If I

remembered correctly, her name was Minato.

"Oh, nah, nah, nah." Seira-san thrust herself into the conversation almost frantically. Hmm? "Nah, we don't really talk about her. C'mon, let's go play some b-ball."

"Oh, okay…"

"We're kinda having a fight right now," my sister muttered in a low voice.

She and I were always fighting, so this sparked a bit of a trauma reaction in me. My heart skipped a beat.

"Oh. Really?" I said.

"Yup."

There was an awkward silence for a few moments. Um… I wondered if maybe I should laugh it off awkwardly, like, "Damn, Haruna, you seem like you get along with everyone. You, fighting? That's wack." But it sounded like this was a topic best left alone.

To dispel the awkward tension, Seira-chan chirped, "Whatever, who cares? C'mon, you don't get a chance like this every day! Let's play and have fun. We're all buddies here, right? Love and peace, y'know?"

And then another girl joined in, late to the party, with a natural grin and a peace sign. "Uh-huh, you know it! What's poppin', besties?"

Seira-chan's eyes bugged out of their sockets. "Huh?! What're you doing here?"

Welp, I figured that was going to happen.

We ended up practicing by playing a two-on-two game, my sister and Seira-san versus me and Kaho-chan. In terms of ability, my sister and Seira-san were neck and neck, with Kaho-chan not far behind. Which meant that I was way below all the rest. Sure enough, it was no

time at all before my feet were dragging and I ran out of stamina. I flopped onto a bench and tried to catch my breath.

"B-basket…ball…sure…wears…me…out," I panted.

As I spluttered there like a beached fish, I heard a cutesy, girly voice squealing, "Huh? Wait, Seira and Kaho-senpai, you guys know each other?!" It had to be my sister. When she was on her best behavior like this, she transformed into a completely ordinary pretty young girl, no traces of the brutish jock left behind. Actually, maybe it wasn't so much that she was acting as it was that she was too unfriendly around me.

"Mm-hmm," Kaho-chan said. "We know each other 'cause of extra currics 'n stuff. Right, Seira-chan?"

"R-r-right!"

Seira-san forced herself to smile while Kaho-chan beamed. They had their arms around each other's shoulders in an attempt to pass themselves off as the best of friends. I guess they were putting up a united front here.

"But, like, I had no idea Rena-chin had such a cute li'l sis," Kaho-chan said. "You're in your second year of junior high, right? I never woulda guessed."

My sister laughed. "Yeah, I get that a lot. Thanks for always looking out for my sis, by the way. You don't mind, right? She's not bothering you, is she?"

Still gasping for air, I called, "Mind your own business," but it had no effect on reality. Maybe my throat mic was muted.

"Nah, she's never a bother," Kaho-chan said. "In fact, Rena-chin's always bailing me out of stuff."

"Wait, really?!" my sister said.

Wait, really?

"Yup, yup! And I'm not the only one. Rena-chin's super-duper popular in class, and it feels like everyone in our friend group's fighting for her attention."

"Wait, in your *friend group*?! You mean like, Mai-senpai and Ajisai-senpai?"

"Yeah, yeah! They're aalll head over heels for her."

Kaho-chan met my eye, and she winked. *Don't give me that "I'm just raising your stock value!" nonsense!* I thought. *Now my sister's looking at me weird.*

"Wh-what's there to like about her, though…?" my sister asked.

"Oh, you know. *You* know," I hurried to say. "Like. Um. You know what I'm talking about. The whatchamacallit."

Kaho-chan folded her arms and gave me a look which said that amateurs should shut up and stay out of it. Then she closed her eyes and said, "Like how quick she is to put out…work."

"*O*-kay," I said, lurching upright and interjecting between my sister and Kaho-chan. "Let's get back to playing, shall we? Hm? Were you saying something a moment ago? I didn't hear anything!"

I'd be in hot water if someone spilled the beans to my sister about the whole two-timing thing. Time to keep the lid on that forever. What if she found out? Then it'd be Hanatori-san and her chainsaw *and* my sister with a butcher knife coming after me. What the heck, man? I wasn't even doing anything that bad! Come on, guys, can't we just all be happy? I promised I was trying my best, right?

***

“I’d really just like to apologize, Rena-chan,” Ajisai-san said during lunch at school.

“Huh? What for?”

The two of us were on our way to the vending machine in the courtyard to get drinks when she apologized to me right out of the blue. My heart skipped a beat. I had as many things to say sorry for as there were clouds in the sky, but I didn’t have the slightest idea what she was apologizing for. Maybe she was about to say, “If I tell my parents that you’re two-timing me, they’ll be super angry and want you to pay damages. You can handle that, right? It’ll be about 1.2 million yen. Good luck.” Now I was worried about whether or not I had 1.2 million yen in my wallet, of all things.

“Not just to you,” Ajisai-san said. “To everybody. I mean, it’s all my fault you guys’re working so hard at the interclass athletics competition.”

“O-oh…that.”

Phew. I almost had to bust out 1.2 million yen there.

I bought myself a Sprite.

“You don’t need to apologize,” I said. “I mean, Class B started it. That’s what everyone’s saying, right?”

“Yeah, I guess…” Ajisai-san clutched her strawberry milk with both hands.

For some reason, it didn’t feel like the right moment to head back to class, so we stayed in the courtyard talking for a bit. Most of my time outside recently had me sweating on the basketball court, so I hadn’t noticed how chilly the wind was getting.

“But you nodded off in class today, right? Don’t you think you’re working too hard?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Huh? Oh, that’s just because I never get any regular exercise. I have, like, zero stamina compared to most people.”

“Okay.”

Ajisai-san looked gloomy, which in turn made me panic. How dare Class B make her look like this? I wasn’t the type to hold grudges for a long time, but this was different. If I didn’t win, Ajisai-san would be in a funk forever.

“I mean, they didn’t even break my pencil case, exactly,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, so? They broke out, so sue ’em! I mean, like, that’s not the issue so much as how rude they were to you. They still haven’t apologized to you, right?”

“Well, no. That’s true.”

I took a sip from my soda and then made a fist. “It’ll be okay, Ajisai-san. Our whole class loves you, and that’s why we want to do this for you. O-of course, I feel the same way, so…I’m going to go out and win this, just you wait and see!”

“Rena-chan…”

Funnily enough, I felt like the weight of my responsibilities had grown even heavier… But no, this was a team sport. And that meant the responsibility was distributed across five people. But what if I dragged everyone else down and made us lose? Then it’d be *my* responsibility again!

Oh god, what was I supposed to do? I was starting to feel kind of not so great. *Maybe I should skip class and go practice basketball instead*, I wondered.

As I anguished over the issue, Ajisai-san abruptly suggested, “Hey, Rena-chan…do you want a kiss from me?”

I all but did a spit take with my Sprite.

“Hello?!” I yelped.

Ajisai-san lifted her hair to hide her mouth. Avoiding eye contact with me all the while, she mumbled, “Oh, um, I was just…you know, I was just trying to think if there was anything I could do to help, and that’s all I could come up with.”

“Wait, but like, um. That’s like. Um.”

“Y-yeah, not a good idea, huh? That’d just be rewarding me, not you.”

Ajisai-san’s face immediately flushed even further scarlet. A kiss? A kiss from Ajisai-san?

After my girlfriend’s proposal, I…I…

“I-it’s not a bad idea!” I protested. “But, like!”

I grabbed both of her shoulders hard. “R-Rena-chan!” she squeaked.

God, how the heck could I word this? I took the gargantuan ball of emotions in me, tore them to shreds, pounded them to a pulp, kneaded them, stretched ’em out, and little by little made words out of them.

“It’s just…I don’t want to!”

“Y-you don’t…?”

Ajisai-san staggered like I’d hit her. No, I didn’t mean it like that!

“No, no, I’m super happy you suggested it. It’s just, like, it wouldn’t be any good for me if I pulled Excalibur out of a treasure chest in the very first dungeon, you know?”

“U-uh, no, I don’t. What does that mean…?”

“I need to get it after overcoming more challenges or else I’ll get too greedy for more!”

Whenever I was with Mai, I always let her do all the steering. That made the immense happiness she'd given me a frightening thing which I reflexively tried to run away from. I couldn't let that happen again here. It was a warning.

"So what I'm trying to say… I-if, say, I won the basketball game, you could kiss me then…or something. Um, that would be okay. It'd be a real reward then, better than, uh, New Year's money or whatnot…"

Happiness wasn't something someone else could give you. You had to go out and make happiness for yourself.

"That's how much a kiss from you would mean to me, you see…"

"I really don't think it's that big of a deal…" she said. I don't think she got my point. "I mean…if I want to kiss you, is that…really such a bad thing?"

For a moment there, an infinity of options popped up in the galaxy of my mind. But pop up was all they did, and I had no ability to process any of them.

I froze and, practically gasping for air, mumbled, "Nah, it's not… so bad… Actually…never mind, yeah. It is."

"Huh?!"

"It is!" I repeated.

"You even said it twice…"

Seeing Ajisai-san look so shocked made me feel guiltier than ever. But come on.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I just think that if I get a kiss from you now without having to work at it, whenever I run into issues later on down the line I'll be all like, 'Well, Ajisai-san'll kiss me anyway.' Then I won't ever take anything seriously and I'll become a lazybones."

"I-I really don't think that'll happen."

“It will,” I insisted. “Or more like, it *did*. I’m actually from the future, and I came back in time to stop that from happening.”

“I think that’s more shocking than anything else, frankly…”

I placed my hand on my heart and declared to her, deadly serious, “That’s why I need to ask you to not do it now. My life is at stake.”

“If your whole *life* hangs in the balance, I can’t exactly say no,” said Ajisai-san. She shook her head sadly but then immediately grinned. “But I guess this is something you really care about, huh? Okay, sounds good to me.”

“I appreciate your understanding and cooperation,” I said with a solemn bow. Ajisai-san pulled a face. Oh great. Here was business! Renako again.

I waved both hands in a “no” gesture. “I mean, it’s supposed to be a reward, so it’s not at all like I’m opposed to it, you know? I really mean it. I really, really like you a lot, Ajisai-san.”

“Okay…”

Ajisai-san looked a bit happier now, thank god. But at the exact same time, an enormous wave of regret washed over me. Why on earth had I let a chance to get a kiss escape me? What if, because of this, I never got another kiss from Ajisai-san in my entire life? *Amaori Renako,* I told myself, *you are an utter fool*.

But still.

After Ajisai-san finished her strawberry milk, she whispered to me, “So, like…good luck at the competition, okay? I, uh, can’t wait for… your good performance.”

“Huh?! Oh! Yeah!”

That meant. If we won the interclass competition, then my reward would be. A kiss from Ajisai-san.

I immediately locked up. “I-I’ll try my best!” I said robotically.

***

“Kaho-chan,” I said, “from now on, we’re going to practice basketball 24/7!”

“Uh, no, that’s literally impossible.”

“Well, true!”

I was fired up that afternoon after school. I mean, not that I had any particular reason to be or anything. It was just that this was a school event, so I figured it wouldn’t hurt to take it more seriously than I typically did. That, uh, that whatchamacallit… That “hard work” thing? Yeah, that’s pretty rad, you know? You put in enough hard work day after day, and you can make radical growth between who you are now and who you were yesterday. Even if the results don’t pan out, the fact that you worked hard is impressive enough. See, I was learning that there were more important things in life besides winning and losing. Never heard of hard work? Don’t worry, you boomers wouldn’t get it.

“Did Aa-chan say something to you or what?” Kaho-chan asked.

“Uh, not really! And what, why Ajisai-san of all people?” I -responded, far too sensitively.

“No reason,” said Kaho-chan. “It’s just ’cause she’s been kinda fidgety today, yanno? And, like, I know you guys are dating, so I’m like, ‘Ooh, someone’s been bitten by the love bug.’”

“Ah,” I said. “Well, that’s nothing but a figment of your imagination, so I refuse to comment!”

Kaho-chan gave me a look like that was some BS and grinned at my reddening, retorting face. “Oooh, are you giving this your all ’cause

of Aa-chan? Are you in luuuuurv?"

"N-n-n-not really!" As shaken as I was, I did my best to deny it. "But, like, given the way they picked a fight with us, it's a no-brainer that I have to do my best, right? And not necessarily for Ajisai-san! Right? Right, Kaho-chan?"

"Uh, duh." Kaho-chan nodded with great confidence. Huh? "Like, I'm not a 'Let's all hold hands; happy, happy, happy' kinda optimist, y'know? I'm the kinda gal who fights when it's time to fight. I'm gonna make each and every one of 'em grovel before Aa-chan."

Dang. Outgoing!Kaho-chan sure was cool.

"So I don't think there's a problem in trying your best for Aa-chan, right? Oh, excuse me—your *girlfriend*. Gotta do it for your loving *girlfriend*. Gotta look cool in front of your *girlfriend*."

"You mess with me an awful lot when you're in outgoing mode."

This was the first time I'd ever been teased about this particular thing before, and I was beyond mortified.

Kaho-chan's fangs peeked out past her lips mischievously. I could almost see her imp's tail wagging.

"Oh, forget about it," I said. "Let's just go shoot some hoops."

"Yup, yup! For Aa-chan!"

"Grrr!"

Even when I raised both arms threateningly, Kaho-chan wasn't perturbed. It didn't even debuff her attack stats. Darn it!

"By the way," I asked, "where are we going?"

I'd left my backpack back in the classroom to follow Kaho-chan somewhere. I was pretty sure there wasn't anything but the gym over here.

"Do you even have to ask?" she said. "If we really wanna win,

then of course we gotta do this—and by 'this,' I mean spy on the enemy."

"S-spy on the enemy?"

She'd really dragged me along on such a dangerous mission with zero explanation?

"Oh, on Class B's basketball team?" I asked.

"Yup, yup. I hear they're all staying after and practicing today. Like, our copycats. Let's steal all their info and leave 'em with nothing!" Kaho-chan grinned and gave me a thumbs-up.

Uhh, but they'd get really mad if they spotted us, right? But she had a point. I, too, wanted to know what the other team was bringing to the table beforehand. It'd help us form a more concrete strategy, and if someone should go, then I should absolutely take the opportunity to go along too.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go spy on them."

"Hold on one sec. We gotta talk about something important first."

"Hm? What's that?"

Kaho-chan gave me a mysterious grin and held her index finger aloft. "Let's give ourselves code names."

"Uh, okay. But is that really important?"

"Um, hello?! If we call each other by our real names, then the jig is up, moron!"

"Jeez, there's no call to be that mad." Her fury scared me.

Kaho-chan cleared her throat. "'Kay 'kay, so I'm gonna be…"

As Kaho-chan stood there frozen in place, a boy and a girl from another class passed by.

"You can call me Wifey!"

“Could you really not come up with anything better?!”

“And I’ll call you Wifey too!” she said.

“We can’t *both* use the same code name! At least call me Hubby or something.”

Kaho-chan marched off, fist in the air. “Let’s get this show on the road, Wifey!”

“People are so going to get the wrong idea if they hear you,” I told her.

“Rena-chin.” Kaho-chan patted me on the shoulder. “Look, no one’s gonna hear a couple of teenage girls calling each other ‘wifey’ and think they’re, like, actually a couple. They’re gonna just think they’re doing it for the bit. We’re not all totally into girls, like you.”

“I keep telling you, I’m not!” God, I kept having to argue with her on this over and over and over and OVER! “For the last time, I don’t *like* like girls! Didn’t we used to talk about guys we liked in manga way back when and everything? Can’t you just trust me, if no one else?”

Kaho-chan snorted in derision. “Says the chick dating two girls at once.”

Well, now that she’d played that card on me, pack it up, folks! We were done here! I was forced to admit defeat.

“Now c’mon, Wifey,” she said.

“Yeah, you got it, Wifey…”

I bet I’d never clear up that misunderstanding for as long as I lived. Not that it meant I’d date girls for the rest of my life or anything, mind you.

Kaho-chan and I squabbled the whole way over to the gym. Then we opened the door surreptitiously and peeked inside. Ah ha. There they were. They were kinda far off, but we could see them more or less.

“Whatcha think, Wifey?” Kaho-chan asked.

“Uh, I think I see three people over there,” I reported.

It was the three girls who’d tangled with Satsuki-san. It didn’t look like Takada-san or Terusawa-san were with them.

“They’re not doing anything ’sides passing the ball around, are they?” Kaho-chan asked.

“Nope. But I’m still getting a totally athletic vibe from them.”

All outgoing guys can be athletic if they put their minds to it, but outgoing girls fall into one of two categories. Some girls (such as my sister) are like guys and grow up with high self-esteem due to their ability to play sports—the warrior type. Others can get away without doing a lot of exercise—the magic-user type. There were many subcategories among this latter group of outgoing girls, such as exceptionally pretty girls, rich girls, super chatty girls, or girls with tough boyfriends. Or, say, girls who talked to Oduka Mai on the first day of high school and thus ended up in the same friend group!

At any rate, it wasn’t a shock to see all of them being athletic, even if some folks around me couldn’t play sports to save their lives. It was technically possible for pretty much everyone in Takada-san’s group to be warrior types.

“Hmm,” Kaho-chan muttered. “Do you think they’re tough?”

“Who knows?” I said. “I’ve never seen them play an actual game, so I can’t say for certain. By the way, Kaho-cha—Wifey, I didn’t know your eyes were so bad.”

“Tbh, my contacts fell out,” she said.

“Huh?!”

Kaho-chan typically cosplayed as an upbeat, outgoing sort, but she showed her true colors when she didn’t have her contacts in. I liked

seeing her cute, more introverted side, but she wasn't exactly the kind of person you could rely on in a pinch. So that made me freak out.

"N-now's not the time for you to be shy! Wifey!" I told her. "Do it somewhere when we're alone!"

"Huh, why? You're kinda spooking me."

Of course, I meant it as a "gift" (euphemistically) for all the teasing she gave me on a regular basis, but there was no reason to go into such detail now, so I kept quiet.

"Anyway, don't worry 'bout it," she said. "It's just a little blurry is all. Oh hey, it looks like they're practicing shooting."

"You're right," I said. "Um…"

Dang. They were pretty good at it too…or at least better than me.

"I guess I'd better put in more practice," I said.

"You're in this thing to win it, huh, Wifey?"

"Well, duh." There was an Ajisai-san kiss on the line, after all.

I bit my lip hard. That was a close one. I was *not* about to tell Kaho-chan that! And besides, the kiss had nothing to do with it. I just wanted to try as hard as I could for Ajisai-san with the rest of the class, that's all. It would have been awfully rude if I only put my back into it because there was a kiss at stake. No one else had the chance to play for a kiss.

"H-hey, Wifey…" I said. "Just, uh, hypothetically speaking… If Mai offered to kiss you if we won, would that help you feel more motivated?"

Kaho-chan took a moment to gulp down both spit and words before tentatively asking back, "Um, what do you mean? Are you offering to give away your girlfriend?"

"No, that's not at all what I meant!"

“You scared the crap outta me,” she said. “For a sec there, I thought I irrevocably messed up your sexual preferences with my hypnotism.”

“No, that’s really not at all what I meant.” I had worded it poorly. Already regretting bringing this up, I amended myself. “I was just wondering how much of a motivating factor it’d be if the person you l-like offers you a kiss as a reward. Sorry.”

“Eh, no worries,” she said. “I’m used to you saying stuff with zero tact all the time.”

“Sorry.”

“But if that’s the deal, then I’d rather go for a kiss from you,” Kaho-chan said.

“Um, what?!”

I looked back at Kaho-chan after she straight-up said something so ridiculous. She gave me a cheeky, flirtatious grin, holding a peace sign up to her chin.

“I mean, you’re the hottest item on the market, Wifey-chan. Mai-Mai and Aa-chan are scrambling to get their mitts on you, y’know?”

“It’s supposed to be less scrambling and more a peaceful relationship,” I protested.

“Well, my point is that a kiss from Wifey’s worth the most. I may not look it, but I wanna get a leg up in the world, y’know?”

R-right, okay…

Weirdly embarrassed, I fiddled with my hair. “It makes me feel kind of bashful to hear you say stuff like that,” I admitted.

“How come?”

“I mean, we’ve been friends for ages and all. That makes you, like, different from all the others, you know? Sort of…special, in a sense.”

For a moment, Kaho-chan stared intently at me, and then she heaved a huge sigh, her shoulders slumping. “Bluh. I hate how you have zero self-awareness.”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothin’, nothin’. I’m just talking to myself. So, is that the plan? Are you gonna kiss me?”

“No!” I said. “It was only a thought experiment!”

I didn’t go around kissing people willy-nilly! I wasn’t Satsuki-san, for crying out loud.

“Oh hey, there’s Little Miss High Horse,” Kaho-chan said.

“Huh?”

Oh yeah, she was right. Takada-san was there too now, practicing basketball with the others.

I shuddered in fear. “Sh-she’s incredible.”

“Yeah, she’s way outta our league,” Kaho-chan agreed. “It’s like comparing the clothes I sewed myself back in junior high to the costumes some pro designer’s made.”

At the very least, it wasn’t just a matter of her being athletic. I bet she had some real basketball experience too, because this girl was just too good.

“Guess we gotta get our veteran b-ball player to work her butt off, huh, Wifey?” Kaho-chan teased.

“That’s total BS!” I insisted. “You haven’t forgotten how bad I’ve been at all our recent practices, have you?”

Just then, Takada-san stopped on the spot and looked right in our direction. “Is someone watching us?”

Gah.

“That’s ’cause you yelled just now,” Kaho-chan told me.

“Well, then maybe you shouldn’t have said anything stupid enough to be worth yelling at!”

As we made a disgraceful show of juggling the blame like a hot potato, we backed away from the door as quickly as we could.

“Yikes central!” Kaho-chan said. “Let’s split up. I’ll go this way, ’kay?”

“Huh? Oh, okay! See you later, Wifey!”

But I ended up running right smack into…

“A dead end!” I cried.

The only thing down here was the gym’s storage room. Could I scramble up over the fence and escape into the schoolyard? Nah, I was sure I’d be caught while I was still clambering over it. Oh god, they were chasing me too!

Just as I faced my impending doom, I heard a voice call, “Renako-kun!”

A girl beckoned to me from the storeroom door. I had no time to hesitate, so I dashed inside.

The girls following me were almost here.

“I’m sure she ran this way!” Takada-san said. “We’ll catch her and mete out punishment.”

I held my breath. Presently, I was hiding inside a locker in the gym’s storeroom with the other girl. The storeroom door suddenly opened with a huge rattle, and light flooded in.

The girl pressed up against me put a hand over my mouth and whispered, “Don’t worry, you’ll be okay. Just be patient for a few more minutes.”

“T-Terusawa-san?” I whispered back. This was Terusawa Youko—a

girl I'd only barely said hi to once. And that was back when she was with Takada-san and the other girls. "Why're you helping me?"

The voices were just outside our locker. "Where are you hiii-diiiing?" they singsonged.

Eeep. Why was this a horror film all of a sudden? And it wasn't even a one Killer versus four Survivors kind of deal—now there was one Survivor and four Killers!

Takada-san and her friends roamed the storeroom searching for me. It wasn't all that big of a storeroom either, so I knew they'd find us in no time. Then, once they found me, they'd gang up and chew me to pieces! I wasn't as thick-skinned as Satsuki-san, so I'd immediately burst into tears. And then they'd film that and put it all over social media. Class A would lose before we even got to put up a fight.

"It's okay," Terusawa-san whispered. "It'll be okay." She squeezed me tight and patted me on the head as I trembled.

"Oh…"

"Don't worry. They'll be gone soon. Relax, relax. Here, try counting back from ten in your head. Ten…nine…eight…"

Her voice was oddly soothing. I wasn't sure if it was a coincidence, but by the time I finished counting, Takada-san's gang was gone. I sagged.

"Great job," she told me.

"Terusawa-saaan."

I was a boneless Renako. I couldn't even stand up without her support. Terusawa-san held me for a while longer. God, she smelled really nice. She was wearing some kind of perfume.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "I was just working out a few minutes ago, so I must smell super sweaty."

“N-no, not at all,” I said. “In fact, you smell great.”

“What?”

Terusawa-san went red enough that I could tell even inside the locker. Oh.

“S-sorry, I didn’t mean it like that!” I said.

She laughed awkwardly. “I smell good, huh? No one’s ever told me that before, so I got kinda embarrassed. Plus, I never expected to hear that from you of all people.”

“I’m sorry…”

We were stuck so close together in the locker that the smell of her perfume grew stronger by the minute.

After giving her a look to confirm the coast was clear, I opened the door. Cool, fresh air blew in, and I took a deep breath.

“Phew. Thanks a lot for the help.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said.

“But, like…how come you helped me?”

Terusawa-san was in Class B and all.

“Hmm.” She propped her chin up on her index finger and looked off diagonally upward. “I guess just ’cause I wanted to help you out, Renako-kun.”

“A-and why’s that?”

“Just ’cause.” Terusawa-san laughed.

Feeling that she meant well in her outgoing, don’t-sweat-the-small-stuff way, I couldn’t question her further. Urgh. Even though she’d bailed me out and all, I wasn’t sure if she had the chops to carry on a good conversation. I figured I’d better beat a hasty retreat.

“Oh, Renako-kun,” she said. “It’s still risky to go out there.”

She pulled me by the hand. Wh-whoa! I'd gradually started warming up to the Quintet girls touching me, but touch from a complete stranger still freaked me out. When I pulled back exaggeratedly, I startled Terusawa-san.

"S-sorry," I said.

"Oh, no, not at all. You know, you're a lot more humble and quiet than I was imagining."

"Huh?!" I replied, keeping my guard up. "No, I'm a cookie cutter model of an average teenage girl!"

Wasn't she basically insinuating I was an introverted loser?

Terusawa-san tapped herself on the head. "Oopsies. Sorry to make you self-conscious about it. I say any old thing the minute it pops into my head, huh? I just thought you'd be a lot more outgoing, that's all. That wasn't very nice of me. I'm sorry."

"Oh, no, it's fine," I said.

Terusawa-san heaved herself up onto a mat in the storeroom and stretched out her legs. I squatted a step away from her in a position where you couldn't see me if you were coming in through the door.

"I have, like, no tact," she went on. "Or maybe I'm just a little weird or something. That's why I didn't have all that many friends in junior high. You know, it was only when I got to high school that I started fitting in with the girls. I guess you could say I turned over a new leaf or something, huh?"

"Huh? Oh… G-good for you." My heart skipped a beat when she mentioned the "new leaf" part.

"Thanks. Anyway, Himi-chan became my friend, and that saved me. I know she might look like the tyrannical empress type to the other classes, but she has her sweet side too. I promise."

“Good for you.” I had no idea what to say, hence why I kept repeating the same thing over and over. But that wasn’t cutting it, so I shook my head. “Uh, why’re you telling me all this, though…?”

“Oh, you’re right!” she said. “Shoot, why *am* I telling you this?”

“Y-you tell me…”

Terusawa-san grinned nonchalantly, and my sheer disbelief at her lack of thought just about knocked me over.

“Well, I guess maybe it’s ’cause you seem like such a nice person,” she said. “I thought maybe you wouldn’t make fun of me even if I told you about how I used to be, but I guess maybe that’s just wishful thinking!”

Well. About that.

“I would never make fun of you,” I said. I couldn’t stop myself from speaking up. “You see, I…”

“Hm? You what?” she said.

“Oh, nothing,” I backpedaled. “I just mean. Um. What I was going to say is… I really look up to people who work hard like that to reinvent themselves. So, uh. I think that’s a good thing. Yeah!”

Terusawa-san’s eyes widened. Hey, wait a sec.

She giggled. “You’re so honest.”

“S-sorry.”

She smiled winningly at my apology. “See, I knew you were nice. Knowing that there’s bubbly, outgoing people like you out there makes me think I can make friends with loads of girls.”

Urgh. I felt guilty for my earlier thoughts about her conversational skills. What a haughty person I was, passing unilateral judgments on people doing their very best! Was I conceited now that I’d made a few friends for myself? Believe me, I should have been fully aware that

everyone had their own struggles! I felt deep, heartfelt regret. Once again, I strongly resolved myself to view everyone exactly as they were, not with pre-conceived biases.

"I-I'm sure you can, Terusawa-san," I said—firmly, this time, so as not to repeat my earlier mistake.

Terusawa-san grinned. "Thanks, Renako-kun. Oh hey, you can call me Youko if you want."

"Uh… Um, uh. Youko-san?"

"Nah, c'mon, try again."

"Huh?! O-okay then… Youko…chan?"

Terusawa-san beamed. "I love it!" Then she laughed. "Gosh, it feels like we got set up by a matchmaker. You're definitely way out of my league, but I'm happy we still became buddies!"

"I really don't think I'm out of your league," I said.

I only came across that way because the coattails I was riding on happened to be uber ritzy Queen Rose originals.

"I just wish you won't think too badly of Himi-chan," Terusawa-san said. "But that's probably a wash, huh? My only hope's that after this competition wraps up we can at least end this on good terms."

"Yeah, that'd be nice."

Mind you, that sounded pretty tricky to me, knowing Takada-san…particularly after she'd upset Ajisai-san, of all people. Still, there was something kinda nice about the idea that I could maybe make a friend with someone from another class, even if we were enemies now. These kinds of things did come about sometimes, after a conflict.

"See you at the game, Teru…Y-Youko-chan," I said.

"Same. Y'know, I'm glad we got to talk today!"

And then, like it was totally natural, we both shook hands. That

made Youko-chan blush again for some reason.

"O-oh, Renako-kun, your hand is really soft," she said.

"Y-you think?"

"Uh-huh… Oh, sorry, I didn't mean it in that way! Wait, what's *that way* supposed to mean? Whatever—anyway, we're not losing to Class A, so watch out."

"O-okay!"

Then, after all that prattling at the end there, Youko-chan left first, checked that the coast was clear, and let me go.

But just as I was about to leave, she said, "Oh yeah, one last thing. Hey, um…"

"Y-yeah?"

Youko-chan covered her mouth with her hand and fidgeted. "I, uh, just happened to overhear. Y-you know, I won't tell anyone that you call Koyanagi-san 'Wifey,' I promise. So don't worry! Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. Later!"

"Wait, hold on!" I screamed.

But she ran away and paid me no notice.

Freaking Kaho-chan! Now Youko-chan totally had the wrong idea. Hey! Kaho-chan!

***

Mai chortled.

"It is *not* a laughing matter," I told her, my face red. "Jeez!"

I brandished my finger at Mai as she sat on the side of the pool. We were at that hotel in Akasaka, the one with the big, members-only

fitness pool. Why were we there, you ask? Well, it was raining today, so basketball was off the table. But I still wanted to keep exercising, so I'd asked Mai if she had any plans and then came with her to the pool. I was in no way a good swimmer, but I splashed my way back and forth across the pool for quite a while. To be honest, it was a little embarrassing, since I was the only one to be putting her whole heart into puttering around a high-end pool like this.

"What a cute misunderstanding, no?" Mai said. "You and Kaho, hmm? Now you're up to three girlfriends."

"Believe me, I'm *not* trying to take infidelity to the extremes here!"

At the moment, I was bitching to Mai about what went down the other day when Kaho-chan and I went to spy on Takada-san's group. Plus the whole using Wifey as a code-name thing, and how someone overheard that and got the wrong idea. I skirted around the fact that said person happened to be Youko-chan.

Mai grinned at me from her seat on the edge of the pool. "Popularity such as yours must be a challenge indeed, Renako."

"There's zero reason that should ever be a thing," I groaned.

It went without saying, but Mai and I were both in swimsuits since we were in the water. I wore a one-piece that didn't show a lot of skin; I wasn't about to wear a bikini that flashed my tummy in front of Mai again. Mai, on the other hand, wore a black bikini so overlaid with ornamentation that I doubted she was going to swim in it. But it looked super cute. I knew she had long legs, but whenever she took her clothes off, it emphasized their length all the more. It hit me all over again that she was a model who competed on the world stage. People are amazing, huh? The diversity in particular.

And speaking of diversity, it was even more amazing that people like Kaho-chan or Youko-chan, both girls who fell into the more cutesy

than elegant camp, had moments when they outshone Mai. But maybe I was just an amateur connoisseur of girls. Girls really were hard to wrap your head around, huh? *No,* I reminded myself, *people who work hard are beautiful in their own way too. Get it together, Renako.*

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you about the Wifey thing at all," I said, only coming to this realization once the words were already out of my mouth. My judgment was too slow. (Please don't slap me, Sakonji Urokodaki.)

"Why's that?" Mai asked.

"Because…you might not like it…"

"I see." Mai crossed her legs and smiled at me. "Might I ask why you think that would be the case?"

"Huh? Is this a sudden Mai quiz bowl?"

"If you'd like."

She smiled. As far as I could tell, she didn't seem upset in the slightest. Well, but I did want to become someone who saw people for who they were and could pick up on other people's emotions. I leaned on the edge of the pool and thought the matter over carefully.

"Let me see," I said. "Uh, well, I was trying to be serious when I asked you and Ajisai-san out. So to lump you in with the likes of Kaho-chan, who's only a friend, might make you think my feelings for you aren't all that serious after all. Or something. Did I get it?"

"Mmm." That didn't tell me if I got it or not!

I kept thinking. "Okay, maybe you're nervous I'm going to go and cheat with someone else besides you guys."

"Mmm," Mai said again. What was that supposed to mean, seriously? "Well, it's just that…I thought it'd be fun to make this into a little quiz, but it's rather embarrassing to say when you get it right, thus

pushing my own insecurities onto you."

"You saying something this rash reminds me of Satsuki-san," I told her.

"Maybe so. At any rate…" Mai looked down and laced her fingers together. "Of your two guesses, I suppose the latter came closer to the truth. I've never once doubted your sincerity. It's just that you're so very charming and sweet that I fear that if someone else were to court you, you couldn't help but want to respond."

"Ugh, sorry."

Satsuki-san came to mind again, so I shooed her away with a mental wave of the hand.

I climbed up out of the pool and sat next to Mai. I felt bad. Feeling bad on top of feeling bad. Like:

Feeling bad, Feeling bad.

I sighed. "Sorry for being such a loser."

"No, not at all. I love that you try to do good every single day," Mai said.

"Mai, you're always so quick to be sweet to me," I whined.

"That's because you were the one who recognized my effort for what it was, even when it didn't bear results."

Mai's thigh brushed mine, and I felt a slight flush of heat.

"You always make me sound like a super good person whenever I talk to you," I said.

"Alas, I think that you are mistaken."

"Yeah, I know!"

The fact that she didn't even hesitate before shooting me down made me snap at her, but she just laughed. God! I kicked my legs in

frustration, sending up sprays of water. Ripples spread across the surface to the far edges of the pool.

"Hey, you know what, Mai?" I asked.

"Hm?"

I wondered how much sharing my feelings was just based on my own insecurities. I wanted to reassure her, right. But I wasn't sure where you drew the line. Nor did I know where to draw the lines between what I wanted to say, what I couldn't say, what I *shouldn't* say, and what I should. If only there was some way to get it all nice and organized and tell Mai the thing that would make her happy.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?"

"I've been so out of my depth recently that I haven't really had the mental energy to sit down and reflect on my actions. Oh, here I go making excuses again. Anyway, I just feel like all I'm doing is causing you trouble nonstop."

We were alone together, just she and I. She placed a hand on my thigh, and I placed my own on top of it. I knew her hands well.

"You asked me out first," I went on. "You asked me out first, and you waited for me for ages, but I feel like I just kept procrastinating on answering you. I really want to apologize for all that."

"Ah, I see."

"Ugh… Yeah."

Mai would certainly never say it out loud, but I had the sinking feeling that she agreed with me. But Mai had been lonely and sad about this far longer than I had been, so I needed to keep going.

"Um, you don't need to believe me, but…I really do like you. Like, a lot. For instance, I know we went to Odaiba together ages ago, but it

was such a ton of fun. You know, I've really fallen for you."

"I know." Mai squeezed our clasped hands. "Why did you say that I don't have to believe you?"

"Huh? Oh, well…"

Good question, really. I thought it over and then strung a couple of sentences together. "I guess I just thought that it's okay if you don't believe me right now. Because I'm going to try my best to prove it to you, so that one day you'll believe me for sure."

Mai giggled and leaned on me. "I adore you, Renako. More than I even did before."

"W-well, I'm very glad to hear that… Hey, you've been asking me a lot of why questions today. You're making an effort to really understand me, aren't you?"

"I am," she said. "Does it bother you?"

"Nah, not at all! I just thought, wow, you're trying your best too." I looked out over the water and said, "I guess, like, I'm kinda happy. It's nice when the person you like tries their best for you. You know?"

Yet Mai tilted her head in confusion. "But I thought that's what I was doing before. How odd. I've tried all sorts of things to make you happy."

"You mean like the time you dragged me to that party or invited me for dinner at the ryoutei?! Those were way too large-scale for me, so I couldn't just straight-up accept them!"

"Oh, so what about small scale?" Mai asked. "Let me see. Would you like any candy?"

"How on earth does giving me candy translate to you doing your best?!" I snapped. "I thought you said you got it!"

Mai let out a cultured giggle. This freaking girl, I'm telling you.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “what exactly did you do to Takada-san, anyway?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have the faintest idea,” Mai said. She put a hand to her chin. Hmm.

“You’ve been involved with so many people,” I said, “so maybe you did something and then just forgot. Or maybe she has a grudge for no good reason. It’s tough to tell.”

“Agreed,” Mai said. “But I’m used to it, in as much as one can be.” She looked off far into the distance. “It’s a situation in which my hands are tied. This is my lot as Oduka Mai.”

“Come on.” I shoved Mai in the lower back and sent her toppling into the pool with a splash.

“Wh-what was that for?” she demanded, turning to me in shock.

Deep down, I was nervous that she’d be super pissed, but I feigned nonchalance and said, “Look, you can just say if you’re sad or upset or ticked off or whatever. It’s fine. Because you’re here with m—because you’re here with your girlfriend.”

Okay, that last line was a little embarrassing, so I got tripped up there. No clinching that full one hundred points for me. But whatever. I pretended not to notice and went on, “You say that a partner’s someone you share both happiness and sadness with, right? So come on, share away. Lay it on me.”

“Oh…” For a few moments, Mai stood there in the pool looking out of place. I wasn’t sure if she was giving in or if she’d been wanting to open up to me for ages, but she eventually started talking in little dribs and drabs.

“It’s not uncommon for me to be met with open hostility,” Mai said, “and to receive unilateral insults from someone I’ve never met before. When so many people know you, it’s inevitable that a certain

number of them will have negative opinions about you, you know."

Yeah. The haters, as we know them colloquially.

"I'm better about it now than I used to be," Mai went on. "I don't let it get to me as much. The cruel things they said hurt me most during a period when I was in elementary school. Back then, the harsh comments felt louder to me than the words of my supporters."

"Oh, I see…"

That must have been around the time she brought Satsuki-san with her to the photography studio, I guessed. Back when Mai was little.

"At the time, you see, Queen Rose wasn't as famous as it is now. This was right around when they started receiving more media appearances, thanks to my mother. I'm sure she must have used some rather heavy-handed measures. It's hardly any wonder people resented me, not when I was the face of the company."

"But you were just a kid, and they were taking out their frustrations on you," I said. "That's awful!"

Mai smiled in self-mockery as my voice rose. "You're right. Now I've given up, and I treat it as something inevitable, but at the time…it depressed me."

Mai looked down, and I could almost see the reflection of a small child in the water. I slipped into the pool and grabbed her hand.

"Mai…"

"I never felt like I belonged anywhere, not even with my classmates, although they were all quite nice to me. I would have been happy if only I could have lived in peace with my family, my friends, and all my loved ones… But I suppose saying that doesn't change anything."

There was a horrible sense of ephemerality in her smile. I guessed

Mai was always putting on the bravest face she could muster, but deep down she wanted more than anybody to live an ordinary, quiet life. She spent her whole life trying to live up to expectations and try her best for other people, but it would have been nice if she could have used a little more of that energy for herself… Wait, but instead she used that energy for me, right? The truth came as a shock. So that meant that when I refused Mai when she tried to make a move on me in my bedroom, I was doing something awful? Nah, it was still Mai's fault for trying that when I wasn't on board with it.

Ugghhh. After agonizing over that, I pulled Mai into a tight hug.

"R-Renako?" she asked.

"I'm taking my Touchy Time."

"I beg your pardon?"

"And when I'm done, we can have Touched Time, I guess…"

"I-I see… Yes, that is how the rules work, I suppose."

I wasn't sure if me getting all handsy on Mai in an attempt to make her feel better was a good thing. I wondered if she'd think that using my body like this was pretty crude, but I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to forget all that unpleasantness. And if it was for that purpose, then maybe I wouldn't mind her touching me so much after all. You know what I mean. Whether as friends or girlfriends, Mai was a special someone to me. So if there was something I could do for her, I wanted to follow through, you know? That wasn't me being too naive, right? If clinging to Mai could make her feel better, then heck—I'd use whatever I had, body and all! Well, within the scope of things I felt brave enough to do!

As I hugged her tight, I felt Mai's supple frame against mine. In the water, our body heat stood out in stark contrast. The places where we touched felt extremely warm.

“F-five minutes are just about up,” I said.

“Which means it’s my turn, no?” Mai asked.

“Yup.”

It was just hugging, not touching Mai in any weird places (whatever *that* means!), but… If, you know, I’d tried touching her there…she wouldn’t really have minded, right? I stared into her pupils. Mai flushed and looked away, and then she enfolded me in her arms.

“Renako…”

“Mm.”

I let her kiss me. It was kinda, like, you know. A throwback. Our lips brushed against one another a handful of times. Hers felt so, so soft—those girlish lips. I prepared myself for the possibility of her trying to slip me some tongue again, but despite me being on guard for it, she didn’t. She peppered me with sweet little kisses like someone raining pecks on a baby’s cheek.

No one could see us here in the pool as I clung to her, the two of us sharing our body heat. The warmth cycling between us seemed so strong it could melt our feelings and let them intermingle.

To be perfectly honest, I loved the way it felt. I’d never savored it like this before. I never knew kissing could be so good—a kiss from your partner, at that. Me, kissing my partner. I couldn’t help but internally laugh at the thought. No one was more shocked than me at the dramatic turn of events in my life since the start of high school.

My mind was so lost in the clouds I didn’t even notice when we passed the five-minute mark, and when Mai drew back, I looked at her in confusion.

“Oh, you see…time’s up,” she said.

My heart rate skyrocketed. “Oh, okay. Sure, makes sense. Yup,

can't argue with the clock! Okay! So, how would you rate your experience, Mai-san? On a scale from one to five, how likely are you to recommend my body to a friend?"

She gave me a look that asked what on earth was I going on about. Mai, of all people! Ugh, how embarrassing. To be fair, though, what on earth *was* I going on about?

"Anyway," she said.

"Right, anyway! Anyway, I really like you!"

Mai looked off into the distance. "I heard from Ajisai-san that she'll kiss you if we win the upcoming interclass athletics competition."

I fell silent and, oddly enough, despite being in the pool, started dripping sweat. "Uh." Struck with the mighty need to say something, my jaw creaked open and I mumbled, "It's not what it looks like."

"Oh?"

Coming right out of the gate to deny it sounded an awful lot like something a cheater would say, to my mind.

"Look, I wasn't trying to keep it a secret from you or anything," I said. "It's just, you know, kind of a delicate topic. Besides, I haven't told Ajisai-san about us kissing either."

"I told her when she asked. That we've kissed, I mean."

"God, you two talk about everything under the sun, don't you?"

Seriously, why? I'd planned on playing innocent until the end, but now Mai and Ajisai-san's buddy-buddyness was making me feel a sense of danger. I mean, I'm sure it was more fun for them to talk things over without me. They always had plenty to talk about and were great at chatting. But then one day the realization would hit them, like the fallen apple that sparked Newton's discovery of gravity. One second, they'd be giggling up a storm together, and then the next they'd be like, "Wait a

sec. Do we really need Renako after all?" Yup. I'd known all along that this would happen. That's why I needed to work, to strive, to do my very best so they wouldn't leave me.

Completely unaware that I was going through it, Mai beamed. "It's similar to how you are thoughtful to us in so many ways. We talk from time to time to see how we can keep things moving smoothly for all of us. This is one example of that."

"What's 'this'?"

"We've decided that if one of us even starts to feel guilty, we can always come talk to the other. And then when the other opens their heart to us, it's on us to properly accept how they feel."

Wow, they'd really talked this out, huh?

"You see, Ajisai is considerate to me in everything she does," Mai went on. "Thus, if my discussing things with her helps the relationship between you two stay positive, it's my pleasure to assist."

"Oh. I see."

True, Ajisai-san was plenty considerate of my feelings, so she was probably even more considerate of Mai's. She wasn't just trying to make Mai feel better or anything. She really was just that kind. I guess there had to be lots of things she felt like she couldn't tell me… So yeah, okay. If anything, this was a good place for me to say thanks.

"Thanks, Mai," I said after a moment of pondering what to say. "I had no idea you guys were doing that."

Mai smiled with aplomb. "Why, it's quite all right. It all came about because Ajisai is almost too nice, you see. Of course, I too wished for her to have this sort of relationship with you. Thus, it only stands to reason that I should take pains to preserve it, no?"

It was kind of Mai to say so, considering my relationship with

Ajisai-san didn't do her any particular good.

"In that case," I said. "Uh. I have a question for you."

"Ask away."

"So, how'd it make you feel?"

Mai tilted her head. "What did?"

"Oh, I mean, you know. When you heard that Ajisai-san and I, um, kissed…you weren't upset?"

"Hm…" Mai put a hand to her chin and fell silent. There was a pause where I think she was trying to figure out how to answer in a way that wouldn't hurt me.

"Well, all three of us are dating, of course," she said. "Thus I assumed it would happen at some point, and therefore I was ready for it. I think it's lovely that you two are happy together."

"You're jealous, aren't you?"

I looked up at Mai. She'd flipped a whole bunch earlier, and that was all pretty much due to jealousy. So I had a feeling that would still hold true here.

"Am not," she shot back.

I didn't believe her, so I asked again to double check. "A-are you sure?"

"I'm not jealous. Duh."

"'Duh?'" I goggled. "Hold the phone, Mai. When'd you get all OOC on me?"

"It's true," she said. "I'm absolutely not jealous. Duh."

"Mai, you say 'duh'?"

"Duh. Of course I do."

God, that was really cute. I mean, I guess? It got me feeling *some*

kind of way.

Anyway, she was 100 percent jealous, hands down. She needed to let the feeling out somehow or else it'd spell trouble for me later, and that would, by extension, put our three-way relationship in jeopardy.

"O-okay, then I'll let you in on it too!" I said. "There's gotta be something you want me to do, right? It's no fair if I only get a reward from Ajisai-san for winning the competition, right? Right?"

Mind you, the whole point of getting a kiss from Ajisai-san had started off as a reward because she felt bad about me choosing to work so hard in the fight against Class B. It didn't make any logical sense why Mai had to get a reward too, but relationships weren't exactly logical.

My words turned out to have enough of an effect on Mai as is. Her eyes swam. "Something I want you to do, you say?"

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Hu

“Y-yeah, uh-huh.”

I could only wonder what in the world she was about to come up with. If she said some crap like us taking a roll in the hay, I could tell her no, right? Actually, wait—*did I have a reason to tell her no*…?

“Renako,” Mai said.

“Bwuh?” I spluttered, my whole body flushing as Mai beamed at me.

“Well, *since you offered*…”

***

I roared as I dribbled ferociously and then chucked the ball at the hoop. I threw it way too hard, though, so it didn’t even come close to going in.

Kaho-chan and I were once again at the park practicing basketball, like usual.

“You’re really into it today,” Kaho-chan said.

I had to catch my breath before I could pant, “Yeah, I guess.” I wiped at the sweat pouring off my forehead.

The thing Mai had told me was pinned in place in my mind. “Well, since you offered…” And there I kinda stopped breathing as Mai continued bashfully. “After your kiss with Ajisai-san…I think I’d really enjoy it if you told me in no uncertain terms that you have feelings for me.”

She sounded like she was sharing an insecurity, and I felt like I’d just been punched in the head. I mean, in the end, yeah. She wasn’t any different than me. Jealousy was a concern even for Mai. Just as I got antsy over the way she and Ajisai-san were so close, my intimacy with

Ajisai-san caused her anxiety too. That's why she basically asked me to reassure her.

I roared again. "Okay, let me give that one more shot!"

You see, this all meant—well, it meant I wasn't trying hard enough. Right? If I'd made it clear enough to them that I could make them happy, there'd be no need for them to feel anxious. Yeah. I wasn't wrong, right? I wasn't able to make it clear enough, which meant that I'd messed up. I wanted to do a way, way better job of making sure Ajisai-san knew how I felt and reassuring Mai. I wanted to make them understand just how much I cared about them. I wanted them to understand the sincerity of my feelings for them.

And to do that, it all circled back to winning the competition. They wouldn't get how I felt from words alone, not unless I showed them through my actions. I needed to show results, to show how hard I'd worked for Ajisai-san. And this wasn't just a one and done thing either. I had to keep following up with more and more later on, you know? This was just the first step.

I had to kiss Ajisai-san and then tell Mai exactly how much I cared for her. And to do that, I had to win. If I didn't win, I'd be in serious trouble!

"Hyah!" I yelled and threw the ball again. It swished through the air, rolled away, and came to a stop at someone else's feet.

The person—a girl—picked it up and said quickly, "Um, e-excuse me? Um. Excuse me."

Her modest, self-effacing voice sounded suspiciously like me from long ago. When I looked up and saw who it was, I was shocked. Wait a sec. What the heck was she doing here?

"Hirano-san?" I said.

"O-oh, yes, hello! I didn't have club practice today, you see."

“And I’m here too!” added Hasegawa-san.

Well, well. Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san.

“Uh…do you guys, like, need something?” I asked.

“Urp.” Hirano-san staggered like I’d just stabbed her somewhere.

Oh crap, I thought. It hit me that the way I’d phrased that wasn’t the best. I recalled a puzzling memory. Back when I was ditching class nonstop, on one of the rare occasions when I actually went to class as opposed to the infirmary, one of the kids had laughed at me and been like, “Wait, what’re you doing here?” Like what the hell, man! Junior high is compulsory, and everyone’s got the right to an education, don’t they? I fall apart easier than a card castle, you know? You gotta handle me with more care! Ah, yes—the soul of an introvert is an innocent and sensitive one. So I got it. Believe me, I *got* it, Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san. The likes of us were always hiding our timid spirits behind bulky suits of armor, weren’t we?

I amended myself, this time trying to be as friendly as possible. “I see you guys’re wearing exercise clothes. Are you going home for the day?”

“Oh, no. Um. Not really…”

“So are you working out?”

“Um.”

Hirano-san fidgeted, not meeting my eyes. I waited for her to speak. Man, the tempo of this conversation kinda reminded me of old times. It put me at ease, but then an extrovert came up and broke the tranquility.

Kaho-chan galloped up, waving like a windmill. “Hey, there you are! Glad you could make it.”

No sooner had she done that then Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san

hid their faces like someone had shone a flashlight at them.

"Oh no, not a sudden burst of sunny optimism!" Hirano-san wailed.

"Oh god," said Hasegawa-san. "She's so cute! My heart! My mind! They're being overwhelmed with cuteness!"

A sudden Kaho-chan was just too blinding. The three of us froze. Kaho-chan, like a T-rex that had barreled into a valley where only rabbits lived, looked at us with her head tilted to the side. After a long pause, she asked us, "What's the matter?" Yeah, I say "us," because I was still a timid introvert deep down!

But in spite of her brilliance, Hirano-san indomitably took a step forward. She was so strong! Panting, she gasped, "H-hey! Um, well…! I-I apologize. I know we're…taking up the precious time of you exalted extrovert-samas."

"So if we drag our feet any longer," Hasegawa-san chimed in, "we'll just increase the amount of time you spend on us… So, we're going to work up our courage and say it. We're gonna say it, we swear!"

The two held each other up so they didn't succumb under the pressure of optimistic extroversion and hightail it out of there. It was pretty moving, to be honest.

"W-we've come!" Hirano-san cried. She fished her phone out of her pocket and held the screen aloft. "You called us, Koyanagi-san, and we've come!"

What in the world…? On her phone was a message that read, "Hey, wanna practice basketball with us? (insert some cute emoji here)." Kaho-chan had their contact info? Now that's what I call being a people person. Wait, I was getting distracted.

Anyway, even if they had been invited, it couldn't have been easy for them to actually show up. I mean, Kaho-chan and I were both a part

of the Quintet. From where Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san were standing, that was basically like having two Mais. Back when I was in junior high, would I have shown up to a basketball practice had my classmates invited me? Oh heck no. I knew that if I showed my face, they'd all make fun of me like, "Omg, you really showed up? LMAO." That meant there was no way I could go. And yet, in spite of all that, these two were here!

Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san exchanged glances, and then Hirano-san said quietly, "You know, we really like all the people in the Quintet."

"Huh?" My heart skipped a beat, even though I knew she didn't mean it in a *like* like sense.

"You're all such sights for sore eyes, and you're always really nice to us too."

"Nah, no way," I protested. If anything, I felt more like they were nice to me.

Hirano-san nodded along with herself and continued. "Compared to the girls at the top of the school social pyramid, us asocial dweebs are nothing but pathetic wastes of space. Our communication ability score is, like, five or something… We just suck, right? And yet…"

Everything she said cut me real deep too!

"And yet all the kids in Class A are really friendly. I know we don't make for particularly good conversationalists, but you guys are always kind to us anyway. I'm just really, really glad I'm in your class."

Hasegawa-san gave that a big nod too.

Yeah. They were totally right. In my case, my decision to talk to Mai first meant that by now I fit right in with the rest of the class. Every class has its own style, which changes depending on how the most popular kids act, like how the perception of a country changes with

every new head of state. When you have popular kids who only think about themselves, the whole class gets kinda mean too. When you have someone who's a kind ruler at the head of the pack, the class ends up a lot nicer. In some sense, that made Mai a queen adored by her subjects. It was impossible to imagine that Mai or Ajisai-san treated other people kindly out of a calculated self-interest, but all the same, I was glad that kindness bounced around and ended up coming back to help them out.

As Hasegawa-san helped support her, Hirano-san said straight-out, "I saw what Class B did, and I think it was despicable. That's why we want to do our best for Sena-san and the rest of the Quintet too!"

Suddenly, that thing Youko-chan said flashed through my head: that she had once been a shy loser, but it was Little Miss High Horse becoming her friend that saved her. My heart ached, ever so slightly.

But I shook off that ache and smiled at Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san. "Thanks a million, you guys."

"Oh god, she's so cute!" Hirano-san squealed.

"Oh my god," Hasegawa-san breathed. "Amaori-san's smiling!"

I grabbed them both by the hand, perhaps a bit excessively. "Let's work together and show 'em exactly what Class A is made of!"

"My hand!!!" Hirano-san squeaked.

"P-please stop, Amaori-san!" Hasegawa-san cried. "Or I'll fall in love with you!"

As more and more happy things occurred, they drowned out my anxiety. I felt like I was standing in the light after all. Class A would win. It was only fair.

"I'm no good at all, but if we all work together, we can make it work as a team, right?" I said. "Time to show some Class A solidarity!"

"Please, let go of my hand!"

“Oh, it’s too late! I’m in love!”

I even had my sister’s tactics. So this had to work. We’d make it work somehow, I knew it.

As I paid no notice at all to Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san, now both bright red, Kaho-chan muttered next to me, “Talk about being a vixen.” I didn’t have a clue what she meant.

Well, as it turned out, once we started practicing together, those two weren’t any better than I was. But hey, that’s what teamwork’s for!

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And we’d gone spying. Plus now I had more people to practice with. My motivation was at its peak, and I had lavish rewards awaiting me. I mean, rewards weren’t the motivating factor here, so let’s just forget about that. At any rate, there was just one piece of the puzzle left for us to achieve victory.

We only had one person on our team with the ability to match Little Miss High Horse’s ridiculous athleticism. Yup, we needed to make Shimizu-kun dress as a girl and add him to the team. Wait. No.

I looked down at my phone. I’d sent a sticker of a cute little koala peeking out from behind a wall to see if you were looking, but I’d gotten totally left on read for my efforts. I’d set a new record: left on read for twelve days running.

“Satsuki-san’s too powerful,” I said as I trudged home from school on a different route than the one I normally took.

Well, if that’s how she wanted to play it, fine. There was only one option left to me. Ugggghh. I guess I had to go showing up uninvited at

her house.

I dragged my feet all the way up to her apartment door. God, you really needed manly courage to go up to someone's house and push the intercom button. That's not how this normally goes, right? You get ahold of someone on their phone beforehand or text them or something to open the door for you instead of buzzing them on the intercom. I mean, I never dropped by my friends' places without making plans first, so I had no idea how it "normally went." It hit me then that I could never cut it as a door-to-door salesperson. Man, people who worked for a living were truly something else.

For some reason, I had the idea to stand in the shadow of a telephone pole, from where I could see her front door, as I thought this over. I wondered if she would come out. I kept peeking out to look, even though I must have looked like a total creep to any outsider. But I swear I was actually her friend—that excuse would definitely get me off the hook…right? Or maybe I *was* a creep, actually… Nah, no way. I was just waiting to catch a glimpse of a beautiful black-haired girl, you know?

"Hey there!" said a voice next to me. "This is the police."

"Huh?! No, it's not what it looks like!" I whipped around. "Um, I'm just, I'm here to see a friend! So, um! I know it looks creepy. And I might be a creep. Wait, no! I have a good reason for creeping!"

There stood a pretty lady, her eyes wide. "Oh?" she said. "Aren't you Amaori-chan?"

"Wait, you're Satsuki-san's siste—mother!"

"Yup, that's me. The oneesan," she said. "Peace out!" She took my slip of the tongue in stride and threw me double peace signs. But she had two concerning objects in her grip.

"Um. What're those…?" I asked.

"This thing in my right hand is tear gas," she said. "And in my

left's a taser."

"May I ask how…?"

"Good question, Amaori-chan. You're about to ask me how come I'm holding my taser in my non-dominant hand, right? But you see, tear gas has to be sprayed right in the face. For a taser, all you need is to land a good hit somewhere on their body to stop them moving. That's why it's better to have the tear gas in your dominant hand."

"That's not at all what I was going to ask!"

Having finished her explanation with a self-satisfied grin, Satsuki's mom tilted her head. "Oh? Then what is it?"

"Um, I mean, I've been staring at the door this whole time, so… how did you get over here without me seeing you?"

"Oh, I saw some creepo at the door, so I came out the back window and circled around behind you."

"Wow." I felt like this was something she had a lot of practice with. "Do you do that kind of thing a lot?"

"Eh, now and then," she said. "We don't have a man around the house, so we have to protect ourselves. I'm always reminding Satsuki-chan too: the key's not to go overboard, but when you get in a fight, you better beat them so hard they never come back!"

I'd always taken Satsuki's mom for more of the laid-back type, but I guess the whole family was a regular tribe of Amazons. Well, it made sense. This was *Satsuki-san's* mom, after all.

She'd freaked me out so hard I hadn't even noticed her appearance. Today, Satsuki's mom was all nicely made up, giving her more of a mature look compared to the last time I saw her. Like this, she looked a lot more like a mom than a big sister…well, kind of? Her dress had a real tight skirt, but she was also just wearing house slippers.

“You look really pretty today,” I told her.

“Aww, you’re so sweet,” she said. “That’s because I’m heading out for work soon. Amaori-chan, want to walk with me to the station?”

Her offer made me recoil. However…

“Oh, I needed to see Satsuki-san about something,” I said.

“Oh, right! Well, Satsuki-chan’s not home at the moment, but I know where she went. Here, I’ll take you. Let’s go!”

She took me by the hand and pulled me along, but I frantically tried to make her stop.

“Hold on, please. That’s a big help, but you’re still in your slippers!” I pointed out.

“Oh, you’re right,” she said. “Come to think of it, the keys are inside, so we’ll have to get back through the window.”

“I-I’m sorry… You only ended up like this because I was being a creep.”

Satsuki’s mom winked and gave me a charming grin. “Hey, mind giving me a little shove on the butt so I can get through the window?” Then she laughed. “Sorry! As if I could ever ask that of one of Satsuki-chan’s friends.”

“Wait, what? Um. What?!”

Never mind the fact that it was a request from a friend’s mom, the fact that Satsuki-san’s mom was so drop-dead gorgeous made this a very hard favor to fulfill indeed!

“So, you ready to go?” she asked.

“Y-yeah, sure,” I said.

Kitted out in a pair of tall stilettos and a tiny purse, Satsuki-san’s

mom walked next to me with a click-clack of heels. If it had been me in those shoes, I'd have been stumbling all over like a baby deer. But she was a pro. God was she cool.

"So you and Satsuki-chan had plans to hang out today?" she asked.

"Uh, not exactly," I said.

She was so incredibly beautiful whenever I happened to glance over that I almost dropped my guard around her. But she was, after all, Satsuki-san's mom. If I went blabbing to someone's relatives about all the various things going down at school, I bet even Satsuki-san would feel mortified. Well, but I *was* already being a bother to her with my whole creepo schtick. I felt bad about not saying anything.

"Um, to tell you the truth," I said, "there's an interclass athletics competition coming up, so I was coming by to invite Satsuki-san to practice with me."

Satsuki-san's mom's face lit up. "Ooh, really?!" she squealed. Urk. "You guys're having a competition?! Aww, Satsuki-chan didn't even mention it! Oh, that girl. She never tells me anything that's happening at school. Ooh, does this mean I can go watch?!"

"Um. I don't think that'd be a very good idea…"

"Really? Aww, bummer. Hey, so what're you guys playing?"

"Basketball," I said.

"Ooh, that sounds great. B-ball, huh? How cool! I just love seeing people dribbling and shooting and all that stuff. You know, back when I was in school, basketball was my favorite unit in PE too. I may not look like it, but I was pretty good."

"W-were you now? Well, you are pretty tall, after all."

Picking out the most important keywords from her machine-gun like barrage of chatter in order to craft a response was an exercise that

took quite a lot of concentration. I felt like my communication skills were getting a good workout.

"Yup, sure am," she said. "So how's Satsuki-chan? Huh? Is she good at it? Or is she not so hot? I bet not; she's not a very good team player."

"I wouldn't go that far," I said and then, at the end of some careful consideration, added "She's…well. She can *kind of* be a team player."

Satsuki-san's mom exploded in laughter. "Uh-huh. Thanks, Amaori-chan. You're right, she's an okay team player. You know, I really do think she wants to be friends with all of you, but she's no good with words. That must make it really hard for her. She's so pretty, though, that I bet everyone would be super sweet to her if she just played nice, don'tcha think?"

"If she played nice, huh…?"

A wild set of daydreams spread their wings: a Satsuki-san who greeted me in the morning with shining eyes and a chirpy "Heya!" And then "Hey, hey, guess what, Amaori? Ooh, 'kay, so…" and here she'd giggle "so I found the BEST book yesterday. Oh my god, it was so good. I'll let you borrow it soon. You totally HAVE to let me know what you think when you're done."

Okay, wasn't that just Satsuki-san's mom in a nutshell?

I caught her eye, and she smiled at me. "Hm?"

Come to think of it, I really didn't know why Satsuki-san took such pains to keep other people at arm's length. If she was all smiley like her mom, I figured she could be super popular without lifting a finger. But… knowing Satsuki-san, I guess she didn't want that.

"Do you mind if I say something?" I said.

"Hm? What's up?"

Her almond-shaped eyes were so much like Satsuki-san's, but hers looked so much gentler.

Unable to meet the eye of someone older than me, I mumbled, "When someone can do a certain thing, it's easy for them to be like, 'How come other people don't do it?' But for the people who can't do that thing, it's way hard. So I guess I'm asking for you to please not say that to Satsuki-san so casually."

I felt like a little kid making an audacious request.

Satsuki-san's mom said, "Amaori-chan?"

"Eep! S-sorry." I inadvertently jumped when she said my name.

"You're a good kid, Amaori-chan. You know that?"

I squeaked as she wrapped me into a tight hug. Her! Satsuki-san's mom! She was hugging me! A full-grown woman! Her open-mindedness was off the charts!

"Uh!" I said. "Um, uh, excuse me!"

"Hey, would you keep watching out for Satsuki-chan? I know I run my mouth all the time, but Satsuki-chan really is something. Team sports may not be her thing, but she always tries her hardest for anything she can do on her own."

"R-right…" And she could be fickle, or troublesome, or way more reckless than you'd expect from her. Yeah, she was something else all right.

"Speaking of which," Satsuki-san's mom said with a titter, "I remember one time, back when she was in elementary school, she came home totally covered in mud."

"Huh? Did she fall over or something?" I asked.

"Nope, not exactly. She said she got trounced in dodgeball."

"Wow. Someone could trounce Satsuki-san?"

And in dodgeball, huh? I felt like nowadays, Satsuki-san could repel a ball with the strength of her glare alone.

"She seemed really upset about it," Satsuki-san's mom went on. "She spent ages after that practicing dodgeball by throwing a ball against the wall at the park. I don't know how she ended up being such a sore loser, but I guess that inspired her to work her hardest."

"Yeah, that sure sounds like Satsuki-san all right."

"She's even worse whenever it involves Mai-chan. Amaori-chan, do you think Satsuki-chan likes her?"

"Huh?! Uh, I dunno!"

To be real with you, I wasn't sure myself. Satsuki-san's mom wasn't wrong—there were moments when I wondered if there was some kind of chemistry brewing…but I was way too scared to ask Satsuki-san outright. I mean, there was no denying she liked Mai, but the question was more whether it was liking in a romantic sense. What if she did? Well, then that would have made her asking me out pretty weird, right?

"I-I think Satsuki-san's sense of affection's a little messed up…" I said. "Or like, I don't think she's the type to say straight out that she's into someone, so I wouldn't know."

"Hmm. Well, she *has* been reading nothing but romance novels recently. It's strange, because she normally never touches them."

"Huh." Did that mean she legit wanted to date someone? *Satsuki-san?* That didn't seem remotely like her. Besides, hadn't she straight-up said she didn't think much of romance? Had she just been bluffing or something? Man, I didn't know. To begin with, I couldn't even imagine her having a crush on someone. But I could pretty naturally picture her dating a girl! Why on earth couldn't I entertain the possibility of her going out with a guy? Satsuki-san going out with a guy was just like… You know! It was just kinda…you know! I had a lot of feelings I couldn't

put into words. I mean, she'd kissed me and all. Thrice, even!

"You're so funny, Amaori-chan," Satsuki-san's mom said, "with the way you keep making different faces."

"Huh?! Am I really?"

I blushed.

As she and I talked, we came to a shrine. It was that same one from that other day.

"Ah ha, there she is," said Satsuki-san's mom.

And there indeed she was: Satsuki-san, dressed in exercise clothes, with her hair up in a ponytail. She was practicing dribbling the basketball in her hand.

"Satsuki-san…" I murmured.

"See?" her mom said, watching over her daughter with a huge grin. "She's not the most socially adept, but she tries hard. She's a good kid."

I gave Satsuki-san a big wave. "Hey, Satsuki-san!"

For a brief moment, Satsuki-san's serious expression faltered. "Bah. Amaori."

I ran over to her. "C'mon, what're you doing practicing here all by yourself? Talk about stand-offish! You should come practice with us. See, it'll be just like the time we played that FPS."

"What are you doing here with my mother?" Satsuki-san asked.

"I-I just happened to bump into her at your house! Don't worry about it. Hey, come on, Satsuki-san, come join us."

Satsuki-san clicked her tongue. Yikes.

"To the best of my knowledge, you aren't any good at basketball," she said, "so that won't do me any good."

“It’s not about it being *good*. Isn’t it more fun to play as a group? Right?”

“I’m not looking to find fun in this process,” she said, “so that matters little to me. I believe it’s perfectly fine if the only joy I experience is in the moment of victory.” She dribbled the ball. “And it’s my fault.”

“Huh?”

“It’s my fault they picked on Sena.”

“No way,” I said. “You didn’t do anything.”

As I started speaking, I realized that Satsuki-san was staring off into space. Err…whoops?

“Had I landed the finishing blow in my encounter with that group, then none of this would have happened,” she said. “This time, I will crush them so thoroughly they will never desire to challenge us again.”

Parroting the teachings of her mom! Satsuki-san being so sweet on Ajisai-san made her pretty gung-ho, or…maybe murder-ho… Maybe during that dodgeball episode, she hadn’t been upset that she’d lost. Maybe she’d just been pissed off!

“W-well,” I said, “the place where we practice has real hoops and everything, so…if you ever want to join us, be our guest.”

Once again, she slapped the ball against the ground with a loud thump. Eep.

“I wouldn’t mind too much on days when I don’t have work,” she said.

“W-woo-hoo…”

Okay, but now I had second thoughts. If Satsuki-san were there, I was pretty sure we could kiss our fun-loving mood goodbye. I needed to protect Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san!

I watched Satsuki-san as she trained so diligently with terrified eyes. Meanwhile, Satsuki-san's mom stood a small distance away and beamed at us. No, believe me, this wasn't the kind of heartwarming scene she was imagining!

And with that, Satsuki-san joined the party. She showed up at practice the next day and was transcendentally good. We couldn't beat her, not even four against one. She trounced us all. Good god, talk about fighting power. With the deva of basketball, Koto "Genocider" Satsuki, on our side, we were sure to win. We could trounce Class B! This battle was set to go down in our favor!

***

But with that being said, I couldn't just leave it all up to Satsuki-san to handle on her own. So I gave basketball my every effort. I read books on it, watched videos, and had my sister watch me from time to time. Starting with Shimizu-kun, I got people in the basketball club at school to give me tons of advice.

There was a feeling in the air that Class A would come together and beat Class B. I'd never gone out of my way to participate in school events before. I was always left on the sidelines, even during Sports Day. They had to force me to participate in choral competitions, and even during Cultural Festivals, I just did whatever they told me to and worked on odds and ends off in the corner.

But this year was entirely different. Turning over a new leaf in high school and joining the Quintet had been all I needed to do to receive such an outpouring of support. Everyone in class was behind me. Mind you, it wasn't *my* popularity—it was just on loan from my friend

group—but still. If anything, that came as a relief and made me resolved to work even harder.

As the interclass athletics competition drew closer, my motives solidified: I didn't want anyone to find out that I was so cruddy at basketball, even though I was once in the basketball club. Or maybe it was just to safeguard my position in class. Or perhaps I wanted to punish Takada-san, like Satsuki-san did. But actually, my real motive was kinda different. Like Hirano-san had said, it was because I loved the Quintet. I wanted to make good on the feelings of Class A as they cheered me on. I wanted to return the favor by doing what I could. Actually, scratch that. By doing what I couldn't. I wanted to do whatever it took to win, no matter what. I wanted to contribute to the group, because I was a member of the Quintet too.

So I threw myself into practice, heart and soul.

Even when it rained and Kaho-chan said, "Nah, I'm ducking out," I still ran to the park instead of mooching around at home. I wanted to get better, even if a slight improvement was all I could manage. Being satisfied with where I was at was unthinkable. I needed to practice—every little bit helped—so that I wouldn't drag my team down.

So I silently made shots at the basket, hoodie pulled down way over my head to keep the rain from getting in my eyes.

I focused all my sincerity toward Mai, all my feelings for Ajisai-san, into each and every ball that I shot. It was because I'd made this decision, the decision to try my best. So I had to follow through, because I never wanted to go back to the person I'd been in junior high.

An autumn rain may be light, but it rains for hours.

Silent.

Silent. Focused.

***

Now it was Saturday afternoon, and the competition was just around the corner. I was about to head out for basketball practice when my mom stopped me in the living room.

“You have a fever,” she said.

“Huh?” I said.

“Renako, you should take it easy today.”

“No way,” I said. “No way, no way.” I shook my head emphatically. “I mean, I need to practice. And Kaho-chan’ll be there in the evening.”

My mom brought the thermometer and held it out to me with a look of concern. “Well, humor me and take your temperature.”

“Okay, fine…but I feel perfectly normal.”

Just as she ordered, I stuck the thermometer in my armpit. When it beeped, I lifted it up and got a surprise.

“Huh?” I said.

“How high is it?” she asked.

I had a temp of 38.2 degrees. “It can’t be that high,” I said, and I tried taking it again. This time it came out as 38.3. It went up. “Huh?”

I flopped down on the living room sofa, and at that exact moment, it felt like gravity had suddenly increased across my entire body. My head ached. Come to think of it, I’d been planning on getting up bright and early for practice, but for some reason I’d slept in until almost noon. I hadn’t even stayed up that late last night either.

“But that’s okay,” I said. “It’s not that high.”

“What’re you even saying?” my mother snapped. “You obviously need to get some rest.”

“But Kaho-chan…”

“Here, I’ll get you some medicine. You need to tell her you aren’t coming.”

Still slouched on the sofa, I hung my head. My vision was blurry and none of my thoughts made any sense. But…I was doing such a disservice to everyone…in spite of all their support…

I tried to fish my phone out of my bag, but it slipped through my fingers. “H-huh?” I mumbled. Now it was hard to even sit up, and I fell over without meaning to. I felt hella sluggish. The muscles I used to move my body were only working at half-capacity.

“But this isn’t so bad,” I said. “And I still suck big time. I need to try harder.”

I rose and was just about to go to the front door when my mother once again thwarted me. She gave me a cup of water and some meds, both of which I swallowed quietly.

“No,” she said. “You need to sleep!”

Told off with such force, I reluctantly went back to my bedroom. I mean, now wasn’t the time for snoozing.

Under the watchful eye of my mom, I changed into my PJs and got into bed. They say being sick’s a mental thing and all, so I figured that a little sleep would make me right as rain and closed my eyes. I’d be fine by evening, and then I could meet up with Kaho-chan. The competition was early next week, so I didn’t have the time to be loafing about. As unathletic as I was, I needed to practice my butt off if I wanted to get good in time. So I had to go. I had to go. As these thoughts ran through

my head, I closed my eyes and fell asleep in an instant.

The next time I opened my eyes, it was already past sunset.

***

The phone next to my pillow vibrated obnoxiously. Now awake and disconcerted by the fact that it was dark in my room, I grabbed my phone.

"What the?" I said. "Five notifications?"

They were all from Kaho-chan. Oh shoot. I turned pale and called her. It only rang for a moment before she picked up.

"Um, hello?!" she said. "Rena-chin, you totally stood me up!"

"I-I'm sorry!" I said. "I was asleep…"

"What, at this time of day?"

"Yeah. I was running a bit of a fever. But I think I'm okay now, so I'll be right over."

I heard some girlish voices on the other end of the line. Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san must have been with her. I needed to hurry up and meet with all of them.

"Rena-chin, what kinda temp're you running?" Kaho-chan asked.

"Um." I waffled. "Nothing too bad. I'm totally fine."

"How high was it? You measured it, right?"

"Uh, yeah, before I had a nap…but I rested a bit, so I'm okay now."

Moments after I said that, I launched into a violent coughing fit. Oh, the timing!

"S-sorry," I said. "I just woke up is all. Plus my room's kind of

dry."

"Go take your temp," Kaho-chan ordered. "Now." Her tone brooked no argument.

I said, "O-okay," and then went down to the living room to get the thermometer.

"Um…" It was 38.6. It'd gone up *again*. I really didn't want to tell her…

"Y-you see," I said, "I usually run pretty high, like around 36. I've even seen it jump up to 37 before."

"Rena-chin."

For a brief moment, I contemplated lying, but I felt like that'd be crossing a line. "Sorry," I said. "Um. It's…"

When I gave it to her straight, Kaho-chan exploded. "What the frick?!" she said. "You shoulda told me sooner!"

"B-but I mean, it's not that high. I figured it'd go down in no time…"

"Like heck it would! Do you know nothing about anatomy? What, have you never caught a cold before? How dumb are you?"

She didn't need to go that far…but since I was the one who'd reneged on our meetup, I was in no place to argue back.

I coughed some more. "Sorry, Kaho-chan."

"Man, it's hard to be mad at you," she said. "But I'm PO'ed anyway. You gotta speak up if you start feeling sick! You'd better devote all your energy tomorrow into recovery."

"Maybe I'll be better by tomorrow," I said.

"Even if you are, I'm gonna hit you with mankind's oldest weapon!"

I shrank back as if the rock she'd alluded to had just fallen on my head. "O-okay, got it."

"Also, like," she began, a more serious tone in her voice, "if you don't get better, you're gonna miss the competition."

"Wait, what?"

How come that hadn't occurred to me? What Kaho-chan had said was a total no-brainer. I couldn't help everyone out if I showed up to the competition this sick. I'd just be dead weight.

To hide how much that shook me up, I nodded. "Right… Yeah, I know."

For once, I was grateful that this discussion was just a phone call. If this were face to face, then I might've upset her with how depressed I looked.

After we talked some more, I hung up and went back to my bedroom. I think my temp had gone up again too.

No sooner had I crawled under the covers than my mom opened my door to check up on me. "Renako, dinner's ready," she said.

"I don't wanna eat."

"Come on, have just a little bit. You want to get better soon, don't you? I've brought you some water, medicine, and an electrolyte drink, so make sure you take them."

"…Yeah, sure."

I did want to hurry up and get better, but I wasn't sure if that was possible. As I slurped down the udon my mom made for me, I prayed that my fever would go down by tomorrow.

I think this was the first time in my life that I *finally* wanted to put full effort into participating in a school event. *Please,* I thought, *just let me do my best somehow.*

And with that thought running through my head, I closed my eyes to rest. But I knew that the fatigue in my body, continuously overworked and unused to such training, wasn't the kind that could clear up in a single day.

***

I lay in bed on Sunday evening. I couldn't sleep, but as I felt too tired to get up, I didn't know how to pass the time. I had gone to a doctor's clinic that was open even on a Sunday, and it turned out that I'd collapsed due to overwork. They told me that I'd recover with rest, but…I probably wouldn't make it in time for the competition.

Once I got back from the doctor's with my mom, Haruna tried to make me feel better. "It's too bad, Oneechan, after all that practice you did." Uncharacteristically, she sounded sincere, neither teasing nor sarcastic. She probably had moments too when she had been unable to play as well as she wanted due to sickness, thus causing her to lose. Still, I felt too upset to give her anything but the most perfunctory of responses. I was being a bad older sister. Or maybe I was just *always* a bad older sister.

I thought back to a moment in junior high.

"Hey, Amaori, are you free today?" a pretty girl in class with light-colored hair had asked.

"Huh?" I said.

She was boisterous, dramatic, and friendly with everyone in class. She looked at me like a monitor lizard with her pretty almond-shaped eyed. At the time, I belonged to a friend group made up of quiet, mousy girls, so the fact that a popular girl was talking to me came as quite a shock.

“Come on,” she said. “Come hang out with me.”

“Oh. Um.”

Sure, I guess we’d chatted before and stuff, but we weren’t particularly close friends or anything. I figured hanging out together would just be awkward and all.

While I deliberated, the girl swooped in closer. “C’mon, don’t worry about it,” she said. “I hear there’s gonna be guys too. What’s the harm in hanging out once in a while?”

“R-right,” I said. “But like, I’m…”

She was practically invading my personal space. “I mean, you don’t have anything else going on, do you? Come hang out with us for a bit.”

“Um, but.” I raised both hands in front of my chest like I was guarding myself, because I knew I wasn’t going to be comfortable sitting around and chatting with a bunch of people I didn’t know.

Looking away and exuding waves of discomfort and embarrassment, I shook my head slightly. “Sorry, Nashiji-san, I don’t know…”

“Huh?” she said.

“I just, uh…don’t really want to spend time with you.”

Nashiji-san’s friends laughed at her. “You just got turned DOWN,” one crowed. “That’s hella lame.”

You know, they told her stuff like that. But back then I didn’t have the peace of mind to realize that me replying like that would destroy her honor.

Her eyes immediately turned to ice.

“What the…?” she said. “You’re just Amaori. Where do you get off being that rude?”

And I never got a chance like that again. If I could go back in time, I might have found a better way to turn her down. Or maybe I could have sucked it up and gone with her.

I was always this way, though. I never knew I messed up until I had a bad experience. I didn't have the slightest awareness about things that other people treated like "Duh, everyone knows that lmao." You know, stuff like how defying the popular kids in class leaves you friendless throughout all of junior high. Or that working too hard at practice backfires and lands you with a fever. Every time I did something different from everyone else, I felt another pang of regret.

I should never have done anything that went against the grain. But then did this mean that I'd someday wish to turn back the clock and choose not to go out with both Mai and Ajisai-san? God. I hoped not.

Someone stroked my cheek. I had dozed off, and my eyelids felt like heavy shutters when I opened them. "Mm," I mumbled.

In the familiar view from my bed was a very unfamiliar person: a drop-dead gorgeous blonde girl. But she wasn't alone. Just a little behind her stood a very kind-looking girl, and both of them looked at me with worry in their eyes.

"My apologies," said the blonde girl. "Did we wake you?"

"How are you feeling, Rena-chan?" asked the other.

As my brain booted up my memories, I finally realized what was going on. "Huh?" I said. "Mai and Ajisai-san? What're you guys doing here?"

They both sat down and leaned up against my bed.

"Kaho told us you were running a fever," Mai explained.

"Uh-huh. So we came to visit and see how you're doing," Ajisai-

san added.

“Oh…” I said, like an idiot. “Okay.” If I thought about it logically, there really was no other reason for them to be here.

Also, by the way—I was braless in my PJs, so it’d be kinda embarrassing to sit up. Deliberately being rude, I pulled the blanket up to my chin and looked up at both of them. “Sorry for worrying you guys,” I said.

The curtain was fully closed, making my bedroom dim. A ray of late afternoon light peeped in through a crack.

“I guess I’ve been going about trying my best all wrong,” I admitted.

Oh, shoot. My vision was starting to blur. I pulled the blanket up even higher. I had taken it upon myself to try my best, and getting the fever was my own fault, so then to cry on top of that when they’d both come to visit me was absolutely pathetic.

I forced myself to turn away and then coughed. “S-sorry. I don’t think I’m contagious, but you probably shouldn’t get too close anyway.”

I didn’t want them to see me looking this much of a mess, especially not after I’d vowed to work my hardest as their girlfriend. Now here I was, already a liar after one month, and I couldn’t stand to face them.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m really, really sorry.”

A sob slipped out.

And then, as pitiful as I was, I felt their hands touch me on my head and back.

“Renako,” Mai said.

“Rena-chan,” said Ajisai-san.

I stiffened. “S-sorry. God, I’m just saying stuff that makes an even

bigger inconvenience for you." I hunched over and whimpered like I was trying to push away their kindness. "I really did think I was trying my best, I swear. I thought that if I worked as hard as I could for you guys, maybe it'd make you both a little happier…"

These were all just excuses. I knew that, and yet I kept going anyway.

"I mean, we're dating and all. If I'm going to date both of you, then I've got to do right by you guys. I thought that if I worked really hard, maybe someday you guys would think well of me…but in spite of all that, here I am. I'm…"

I was so ashamed of myself. God, what a disappointment I was.

"No matter what I do," I said, "I always suck. I can't do anything right. Even though everyone in class is rooting for me, I can't live up to their expectations. I'm letting down Kaho-chan, Hasegawa-san, Hirano-san, and Satsuki-san. I'm letting down all of you."

I couldn't hide my tears any longer. God, I must have been upsetting both Mai and Ajisai-san. I hated the fact that I upset them. There was no way I could learn to like myself like this. I'd wanted to, but it was impossible. I'd wanted to, but it was never to be.

"Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said. She reached out and stroked my hair. They were both so kind that of course they'd be concerned about anything I said.

"S-sorry," I said. "I'm really sorry."

I sat up without thinking, propelled by an intense feeling of self-loathing.

Ajisai-san looked up at me with clear eyes from where she kneeled next to the bed. Then, in a voice that sounded like she was taking me away someplace else, she said, "You know, if you don't feel better by tomorrow, I think I might skip school too."

“Wait, what?” I said. I stared at her in amazement.

For just a moment, her eyes flicked downward. “I’ve been doing a little softball practice myself, but…I think I just might skip anyway.”

The lashes of her lowered eyes sparkled like rainbows.

“How come?” I asked.

“Hmm.” She met my eye and beamed. “Well, if we lose, then you and I can go halfsies on the blame, right?”

She said it like she was offering to split the last piece of cake.

I didn’t even think. I just yelled, “No way!”

Ajisai-san started. “Why not?”

“I mean, I can’t let you go that far… There’s no need for people to get mad at you too.”

“Sure. But maybe it’s not about whether there’s a *need* for it, exactly.” She smiled.

Still dripping tears, I shook my head slightly. “You can’t. It’ll inconvenience everyone else. I can’t let you go that far, Ajisai-san.”

I mean, Ajisai-san was the nicest person I’d ever met. And skipping school when everyone was doing their absolute best for her would only hurt Ajisai-san herself. If I were in her shoes, could I have done the same thing? Nuh-uh, no freaking way.

“But you know,” Ajisai-san said, sitting down on the bed and scooting closer, “I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“But still,” I protested.

“I’m biased,” she said. “But that’s something I chose to be when I started dating you.” She took my limp, dangling hand and held it lovingly. “I think that’s what choosing someone’s all about.”

“Ajisai-san…”

“I still feel the same way as I did when we talked about this before. I don’t want you to have to feel sad and in pain. I’d love to take on all those bad feelings for you if I could.” She giggled. “That’s ’cause I’m selfish like that.”

If that’s what she called selfish, then I guess we both were. The fact that I wanted to recompense both her and Mai *and* not let down the class was just me being selfish too.

But I insisted, “I would hate for you to be the villain and have everyone upset with you.”

Ajisai-san laughed. “Don’t worry. I’m pretty popular, after all. A little thing like this will be a-okay.”

That sounded like something the messed-up version of Ajisai-san in my head would say, but the connotation was totally different. She instead sounded like a mischievous witch teaching me a hidden trick that would prevent anyone from getting hurt.

I gulped back tears and snot. “But like, I’m still really sorry. I made you guys worry and have to look out for me.”

“I mean, I did it to you first,” Ajisai-san said. “I dragged you around all summer.”

I mopped at my face with a tissue and then sighed. Ajisai-san patted my head again. “Rena-chan, you’ve been working really, really hard. I think that’s amazing. I’m positive you’ll get another chance, you know. It’s all going to be okay. Because I really, really like you, understand?”

“Yeah, I get it…” It felt like Ajisai-san, who said she was even willing to skip school for me, had stopped up all the cracks in my heart. “Thanks, Ajisai-san.”

After expelling such intense emotion, my heart was all shriveled up and dry. But I could feel it filling up with a warm, fuzzy feeling from

deep inside. I bet it was the warmth of Ajisai-san's affection.

Mai had been kindly watching over us for that whole conversation. "In that case," she said, sitting down on the bed too with a grin, "I'll simply have to pull off such an overwhelming win in the competition that neither of you two shall have to worry about it afterward."

Ajisai-san giggled at that proclamation. "Ooh, what's that all about? Aren't you cool, Mai-chan?"

I rubbed my eyes and looked back at Mai. "But you're supposed to be playing softball, right? You're the pitcher and everything."

"If you're sick with a fever, then surely they'll allow me to sub in for you. There's no harm in pitching in for a game. It'll be a warm-up."

Well, if Mai was going to play basketball too and pull off a flawless win, then Ajisai-san and I could both go to school, no problem! But this was all kinda… Man.

"I feel like this all works out too nicely for me," I said.

"And is there a problem with that?" Mai leaned in.

"I-I mean… No, but…"

"Ajisai-san will protect you, and through my efforts, Class A will win. Then everyone will be happy, no?"

"It all sounds great to me, Mai-chan," Ajisai-san said.

Mai and Ajisai-san teamed up with me caught between them. My two girlfriends' words were making me flip out.

"But I didn't even do anything," I said. "It's no fair for me to feel happy when I haven't done anything for it."

Up until this point, every bit of happiness that I had came from wishing for it, working for it, taking action toward it, and finally winning it for myself. So it made just getting happiness dropped on me feel really, really weird.

Ajisai-san hugged me from the side. “But you *have* done something, Rena-chan. That’s why I want to do something for you too.”

Mai also came up from the opposite side and hugged my arm. “She’s right. You were the first one to act, and that means you have a right to be happy too. I would even say that it’s my obligation to make you happy.”

The way we were sitting was like a weird, deformed triangle. I felt their warmth around me, and I… I…

I said, “Thanks, you guys. Thank you both so much.”

When they were being this nice to me, I couldn’t continue to sulk and give up on myself. The tears kept coming, like it was washing the self-hatred away. As they hugged me, I thought, *They’re being so nice to me because we’re dating. But even so…*

If this is what it means to date them, I’m glad I am. For the first time ever, I thought, *You know, this girlfriend thing is pretty nice.*

***

After leaving Amaori Renako’s house, Mai and Ajisai walked through the dusk to the train station side by side.

“Poor Rena-chan,” Ajisai murmured, in a voice like a small child pressing close. “She’s practiced so hard and everything.”

“Indeed.” Once again, Mai thought back to the sight of Renako crying. “I’ve seen many cases where one is too sick to perform as well as they’d like. Still, whenever it happens, my heart aches for them.”

Mai struggled with it, as she never allowed herself to cry in front of other people. She felt helpless whenever she saw a girl cry. Additionally… Mai’s mother momentarily flashed through her mind, but

she shook the thought away. “At any rate, I must simply give it my all tomorrow. I have your share of our class’s expectations to think about, after all.”

“Sorry that we dumped all that responsibility on you, Mai-chan,” said Ajisai.

“Oh no, it’s quite all right. On the contrary, having this challenge before me brings out my fighting spirit. Besides, we still don’t know if Renako will be too unwell to go to school yet, do we?”

“Yeah, that’s true. Oh hey, what do you think about stopping by at a shrine on the way home?”

“To pray for her?” Mai asked. “That’s not a bad idea at all.”

The two walked slower than their typical pace, as if to hold on to the lingering sensation of their visit with Renako.

“You know,” Ajisai brought up in a sort of confession, “I was kind of on the fence about going to see her alone when I saw Kaho-chan’s message in the group chat.”

Mai said nothing but listened in silence.

“I’m pretty sneaky, so I was thinking that if I went alone, maybe I’d get a good opportunity to kiss her.”

“Oh?” said Mai.

“Yeah.”

It was a natural enough thing to think. Sharing a girlfriend meant they each had to share Renako’s time and affection. However, if Ajisai was honest enough to admit that she felt that way, then Mai couldn’t consider her sneaky at all.

“See, I was also thinking,” Ajisai-san went on, “that I might just get in your way, and maybe I should hold back and let you two have alone time. I was really hung up on this, even though you messaged me and suggested we go together.”

Ajisai-san looked down at the tips of her toes as she walked. What if Mai had surrendered that opportunity to her?

“Nevertheless, I’m sure I would have continued to invite you until you agreed,” Mai said.

“…You really aren’t bothered by this anymore, are you?”

“Well, because I care so much for both of you.”

Naturally, these were not emotions that could be dispelled with simple lip service, but Mai had already shown her true self to Renako and Ajisai alike. She’d shown them her bad sides from every angle, so it seemed a bit late now to try and cover that all up. All she could do, she thought, was try her hardest for both Renako and Ajisai’s happiness in this interval where they could all live in harmony.

“You’re so cool, Mai,” Ajisai told her.

“Please don’t give me that nonsense.”

Mai knew Ajisai wasn’t the sort to mean it as a joke, but she felt like she was being teased all the same.

Ajisai giggled a little in apology and then turned back around to face forward. “But you know, I think I sort of get it now. I think I would have said the same thing if I’d come to visit her alone. I mean, that she and I both skip school.”

“Oh?” said Mai. “I would have never been able to say that. I’m rather jealous you think such things that let you get so close to her.”

No matter how much progress she made, Mai couldn’t abandon the role she played for everyone else. Not even now that she had a girlfriend. Ajisai could easily cross the boundary line between her public and private personas, and that made Mai consider her well and truly to be an amiable, charming girl.

And yet…

“Nuh-uh, I don’t think it’s like that.” Ajisai-san slowly shook her head. “That’s as far as I could go for her.”

“What do you mean by that?” Mai asked.

“I’m pretty sure Renako would get stressed about it if she and I both…well, ran away together.”

Deliberately using such strong words, Ajisai rejected her own self-presented image of the future. Instead, she lightly took Mai’s hand.

“It’s because you showed up too that Rena-chan was able to get over that. You saying that you’ll win is a guarantee that no one will have to be unhappy.”

Mai smiled bitterly. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“W-well, I am,” said Ajisai-san, putting on a childish voice like a demanding girlfriend. Then she looked away, embarrassed. “That’s why I just wanted to say… Well, I’m glad you were there with me. I’m not just saying that either. I really mean it.”

She swung their clasped hands lightly.

“See, back when we agreed to date, I thought that you and I would have to split Rena-chan and we’d each end up with half. But that’s not really how it’s turned out. We can pick up Rena-chan’s heart together, you know?” She spoke like she’d made a marvelous discovery. “Even if I’m struggling and can’t really lend a hand, you can be there for her, and I can rest easy knowing you’ve got her. In some sense, it feels kind of frustrating…but I’m more glad about it than anything else.”

Mai knew Ajisai could say this because she could care about other’s happiness like it was her own. Thus, Mai shook her head.

“My apologies,” she said, “but I disagree, Ajisai. For you see, if you are struggling, then that is the time when Renako and I should come to you, no?”

She smiled at the girl standing next to her.

Mai’s smile dazzled Ajisai for several moments. Then Ajisai said,

“If that ever happens…I might be so happy I start sobbing.”

Mai giggled.

Ajisai felt very conscious of their linked hands. “Um, hey, Mai-chan…” she said.

“Hm?”

“This is just, um, totally hypothetical, but…” She worked up her courage, and said, “If… If I said I wanted to kiss you…would you mind?”

“Pardon? I mean, I suppose.”

Startled, Ajisai looked at Mai. Then she blushed and waved her hands frantically. “Th-that’s not what I meant,” she said. “I just, um, I mean that Rena-chan and I haven’t kissed yet, so, um. I guess maybe it’s too soon to bring this up, so maybe. Wait, but if I say that, that makes it sound like it’ll happen sooner or later, and that’s not what I mean either. I just.”

“Y-yes?”

Ajisai-san gasped for air. “W-well, all three of us dating isn’t like a love triangle, you know? So I just thought, maybe… Maybe someday we’ll do that, you know… So I figured I’d just ask what you think about it… You know.”

Ajisai-san turned the other way to hide her reddened face.

Mai considered the idea with great care. When this topic had come up in the past, she had been unsure about kissing Ajisai since she liked Renako and Ajisai in different ways. But things were different now that all three were dating, so she gave it more thought.

“I’m quite positive it would make me happy to do so,” she said.

“H-huh, really?”

Ajisai’s hand felt slightly hot in Mai’s.

“I had just been about to give up on my crush when Renako returned my feelings, and I have you to thank for that,” Mai said. “So of course I like you more than I used to. It’s only reasonable, no? It isn’t the same as how I feel about Renako, but I have no objection to kissing as a show of my deep affection for you.”

“A-ah, so that’s how you’re looking at it…”

“Hm? Is that so odd?”

“No, not really,” Ajisai said. “Y-yeah, you’ve kissed a whole bunch before too, right? I guess I’m just a little too self-conscious about kissing or something…”

Mai jokingly laughed at Ajisai and her blush, which had crept up all the way to her ears.

“Then would you like to try it now? It’s quite pleasant, as it turns out.”

“Huh?!”

Mai gave Ajisai’s hand a gentle squeeze, making Ajisai amusingly flustered. “B-but that would mean my first kiss would be with you!” she protested.

“It’d be an honor,” Mai said.

“No, it wouldn’t!”

Mai giggled, which made Ajisai pout. “I feel like you always tease me whenever we talk, Mai!” she complained.

“Do I? I suppose you’re so cute I simply can’t help myself.”

“W-well, I’ll have you know that I take on more of a big sister role when I’m with Renako, so there.”

“From what I’ve seen,” said Mai, “you’re more like the little sister.”

“Aw, jeez!” Ajisai groaned, but then she immediately laughed.

Mai, too, laughed with joy.

This pair had both fallen for the same girl. If there was a phrase to correctly describe the strange bond these two shared, then perhaps they were more than friends but still not quite lovers themselves. It filled Mai with pleasure to spend this rather bittersweet moment with Ajisai.

Ajisai finally calmed down and exhaled. “But you know,” she said, “I really hope Rena-chan feels better tomorrow.”

Naturally. “I’m certain she will,” Mai said.

“Mai-chan?” Ajisai-san tilted her head, inquisitive.

Mai smiled and tapped a finger to her lips and said, like it was the ace up her sleeve, “Well, after all, is that not what you and I are praying for?”

***

“Did my fever go down?” I muttered, feeling like I was dreaming.

I took my temp the minute I woke up on Monday morning and stared at the numbers on the screen. I learned later that fevers can come on as a psychological thing, so that meant that after Mai and Ajisai-san’s words gave me some relief, a full recovery was just around the corner. One of those things, you know? It was all thanks to them visiting me.

So anyway!

“This means I can play in the competition, right?” I said. “Right?”

I brandished the thermometer at my mom like a dog bringing back a Frisbee. *Well, what about it? Huh? Huh?*

But my mom waffled for a moment. What for, I ask you? My fever went down, didn’t it?

“But I don’t know…” she said. “They say the convalescent period is pretty risky…”

“But Moooom!” I begged as I pulled on her sleeve. *Pretty, pretty please?*

“It’s too early for you to be this loud,” my sister grumbled as she came into the living room. Unlike me, still in my pajamas, she was all ready to head out the door.

“Please, please let me go to school!” I said. I was even willing to get on the floor and beg as I clung to my mom.

My sister butted in as she munched on a piece of toast. “Where’s the harm in it? Her fever went down, didn’t it?”

“Haruna-chan!” I cried. My angelically adorable, wise, brilliant, exalted little sister had sent me help in my time of need!

“Come on, Mom,” she said. “You used to do volleyball, right? You have to know how she feels.”

“Well, I suppose,” my mom said.

“And like, it’ll be super awkward if she no-shows when she’s supposed to be on the competition team. She might stop going to school again.”

Oh, my dastardly little sister, threatening my mother with my dark past! But you know how girls are into bad boys, and even if she wasn’t a boy, per se, I now felt I could kinda see the appeal. Hey, Haruna, did you want any pocket money? *You want some allowance? There you go, kiddo. I’ll get you a Choco Baby sometime soon.*

“I guess there’s no point in arguing,” my mom sighed. “But make sure to take it easy, you hear?”

I responded, as cheerfully as if she’d just called me over to give me my New Years’ money, “You got it!”

I needed to text Ajisai-san ASAP too. I had to tell her she could come to school today!

With that, it was finally time for the big game: the interclass athletics competition. All I had left to do was show off the fruits of my labor, deliver Class B a crushing defeat, and take home the victory! Well, not really. But if only.

I still felt like I had a huge bit of relationship troubles waiting in the wings for me. Whenever you had a special someone, you both wanted each other to be happy—which was common sense, but I was only realizing it clearly now. And sometimes you did the wrong thing in the pursuit of your loved ones' happiness, just like when Ajisai-san offered to ditch school for me.

And as for me? Well…

Group Chat Name: 5déesses (4)
Part 4

Star Lily: So you guys all caught that, right?

Crane-chan: Indeed I did.

Star Lily: Yeah, like we got to see the basketball teams from the other classes. They didn't show their faces, but that's totally Koto Satsuki, right?

Queen: …

Star Lily: Like, I hear she even beat a college basketball player like it was nothing.

Crane-chan: I was told she was the secret sixth member on a team that won the junior high championships three years in a row.

miki: Wait, hollup. Who's spilling this tea to you guys?

Star Lily: Huh? Someone in Class C.

Crane-chan: I heard from a person in Class D.

miki: That's all the doing of…none other than Koyanagi Kaho.

Star Lily: Fr?!

Crane-chan: What do you mean, Miki?

miki: She's doing psyops. She made videos and started rumors all just to throw us off our game. There's no knowing what Koyanagi Kaho might do.

Star Lily: But I chat with her all the time…

Crane-chan: Yes, as do I. She isn't the type to do something so horrid.

miki: That's how she does it!

Star Lily: Yeep.

miki: She butters up to everyone and then uses that against them when it serves her needs! She's a greedy harlot!

Crane-chan: Do you mean to say that all those videos of Koto Satsuki were fabricated?

miki: Nah, idk about that.

miki: Knowing Koyanagi Kaho, she prolly thought we'd be able to clock it if she faked 'em, so she mighta got the real thing somehow to throw us off guard.

Queen: Oh, enough of this nonsense!

Star Lily: Himi-chan!

Queen: No matter what, the match is tomorrow, and we shall win it. Won't we, girls?

Queen: We simply cannot allow ourselves to lose or exhibit any other such shameless behavior. Not this late in the game.

All: …

Group Chat Name:
Behind The 5déesses (3)

Star Lily: So like

Star Lily: do you guys think Himi-chan's doing okay?

Crane-chan: I feel that she was a bit at the end of her rope back there.

miki: Uh-huh.

Star Lily: What do you think'll happen if we lose?

Crane-chan: Well…she was the one who started it. So, like she says, it'll be horribly shameful. I suppose her social standing in class would suffer a dreadful loss.

miki: Yeah, there's a lotta kids in our class who don't really like her pushy behavior. If she loses, they're all gonna gang up on her…

Star Lily: I guess the Quintet is plenty popular even outside of Class A.

Crane-chan: …

miki: …

Star Lily: Hey, you guys?

Crane-chan: Hm?

miki: Wh-what's up?

Star Lily: Oh, never mind! It's nothing.

Star Lily: Just, like, good luck tomorrow, gang!

Crane-chan: R-right! Let's do our best for Himiko!

miki: Y-yeah! We're gonna win this thing!

Star Lily: You know it! No matter what it takes.

Chapter 4:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Ever Be a People Person!

THE DAY OF THE MATCH brought clear weather, and I was fit as a fiddle too!

As an aside, we still had class like normal in the morning, but afternoon classes were canceled so we could have the competition. I could have chilled and slept in until noon, but my fever had already gone down and everything.

Wearing a smile as sunny as the worry I'd caused everyone, I walked into class and belted out, "Howdy, gang!"

"Rena-chin!" Kaho-chan cried.

I yelped as she tackled me and grabbed my shoulders. I lost my balance and pitched forward, and she wasted no time in putting her hand on my forehead.

"Your fever's a goner!" she said.

"Uh, yeah. I mean, I told you I got better already."

"Yeah, but I didn't really trust you."

"Say what now?!"

Come on. There was no one in the world who wanted to skip school on the daily more badly than I did. So would it have killed her to have a little faith in me when I came to school while I was still in recovery? Well, I guess you could make the argument that this was something stupid I was doing for the sake of my class. I wasn't really the type to think about the consequences, after all. Okay, I got her point. Kaho-chan was right.

"Sorry for making you worry about me," I said.

“God, you can say that again,” she said. “Eh, but I’ll letcha off the hook ’cause you’re here now. But you gotta take it easy until the competition. C’mon, sit down!”

Kaho-chan forced me into a chair. The fact that such a thing was necessary made me, to be totally real with you, kind of happy. Heh heh.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “I’ll save my strength.”

“Yup. If there’s anything you gotta do, I’ll take care of it for you. So sit tight.”

She was so nice…

“Oh, but before that,” I said, “I need to run to the bathroom.”

“Sit!” she barked. “I’ll go for you!”

“How is that supposed to work?!”

Because, as it turns out, one can’t go to the bathroom for someone else, I set off for the restroom. I bumped into Hirano-san and Haseagawa-san on the way and gave them both a heartfelt apology.

“Sorry,” I said, “for getting a fever and making everyone worried. I’m completely good to go today, I promise! Now let’s go give this basketball game our all!”

Thus, even as they were concerned for me, they also felt intensely motivated for the competition later today. Heh heh! Morale ran high with Class A!

As I was washing my hands, the school’s number one raven-haired beauty walked into the girls’ bathroom.

“Oh,” I said. She didn’t reply. “Satsuki-san.”

“I see you’re better now,” she told me.

“Yeah, I guess.”

She stared down at me. Wh-what was this all about?

“Do your absolute best today,” she said.

“W-will do!”

“For the sake of your beloved Sena, no doubt,” she added.

I gritted my teeth. “W-well, yes, as it turns out… But that’s rich of you to say when you’re all fired up because of Ajisai-san too!”

Standoffishly, she showed no emotion on her face whatsoever. What was up with that? But I couldn’t say anything else in the face of her judgmental disrespect. She was pretty much our best weapon, so I guess I had to put up with this for the time being…right?

But just as I was about to leave the bathroom, she said, “Say, Amaori,” making me stop in my tracks.

“What?” I asked.

Satsuki-san stood in the center of the room. After checking to see that no one else was around, she asked, “Are you happy dating both Mai and Sena?”

“Uh…in what sense?”

“Please, you needn’t assume I have any hidden intentions. Take the question at face value.”

She said that, but she was also grinning like a man coming up to your house in the middle of a night with a hatchet saying, “Me? Oh no, I’m no shady customer.”

“Satsuki-san, you have intentions hidden behind intentions hidden behind *intentions*,” I told her.

“Goodness, you’re obnoxious,” she said.

“Hey, Satsuki-san, you see that thing right there? That’s called a mirror.”

As I kindly pointed out the bathroom mirror, Satsuki-san gave me a murderous glare. Ah, now that was more like it.

“Yeah, well,” I said. “I’m happy. It’s just…yeah.”

“Really now?” For some reason, Satsuki-san didn’t sound very pleased with me. But I answered her and everything! “You were certainly reluctant when I asked you.”

“That’s got nothing to do with the present!”

I was pretty sure it was a mark of growth for me to have moved beyond the way I thought in the past. Maybe, I considered, I should turn the tables and tell Satsuki-san how great my girlfriends were in order to get the better of her. Mind you, I doubted she’d understand. But it might be fun to give it a try. I’d pay for my curiosity with my life, granted, but still.

“Amaori,” Satsuki-san said.

“Y-yeah?!” I cried, my voice cracking.

Oops. Satsuki-san was a phantom who could read minds! Okay, no she wasn’t. But I just couldn’t help but think that. It wasn’t a crime to *think* that, right? People should be free to think whatever they want, right?

She stared me down and then looked away like a cat who’d lost interest. “Well, I’m glad to hear it,” she said.

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

Was she sincerely wishing me happiness…? Nah, no way.

I felt a little chilled. “I-it’s okay, Satsuki-san. We’re still friends, even if I have girlfriends now!”

Satsuki-san didn’t answer but instead walked into a stall.

Man, this was all kind of… Like, you know. I wasn’t sure how to say it. Like a hangnail. I normally wouldn’t be concerned about this, but there were moments when Satsuki-san just sort of seemed off. It all started back when she’d sent me that message. Or maybe it all began

when I started going out with Mai and Ajisai-san. What was the deal with this…whatever…Satsuki-san didn't want to talk about? What would I do if the hangnail never healed? It made me worried. I had plenty on my plate to keep me busy until the competition was over, but when it was all said and done, I hoped I could talk things out with Satsuki-san.

"Satsuki-san, are you lonely because I have less time to hang out with you now that I've started dating Mai?" I asked, stupidly.

"Amaori-san," Satsuki-san said through the stall door. "Would you like to find out if imbeciles can recover from death?"

My answer whizzed back as fast as the wind: "I'll pass!"

Once again, there was a crowd of people in the hall in front of my classroom. Uh-oh. I'd seen this before. I had a bad feeling about it as I sneakily peeked into the middle of the group. There stood Godzilla and King Ghidorah, aka Mai standing off against Takada-san. Oh god. The top of the pack for both Class A and Class B.

"My sincerest apologies," Takada-san said. "Here I thought we'd settle things later. But you leave me no choice. I shall simply have to crush your friends and show the world which of us is the superior!"

Takada-san steamrollered on with her usual scream of laughter, as would befit the top student of Ashigaya High. Mai, I assumed, would simply brush it off like normal.

But Mai said, "Goodness, how I tire of your yammering."

Tension filled the air at that dangerous statement.

"I beg your pardon?" Takada-san said. All her mirth had vanished.

Mai smirked, a clever look in her eyes. "I meant," she said, "that I am not the sort to sit idly by and let my friends get hurt."

There was a storm brewing between them!

“H-hmmph,” Takada-san scoffed. “Say what you like, but nothing can shake the foundations of the 5déesses’ victory! I cannot wait to see your vexation later.”

“We’ll see about that,” Mai said.

You normally never saw Mai lose that gentle smile of hers, but this was the one exception. She put herself right in Takada-san’s personal space with uncharacteristic boldness. Oh god, what a classic pretty girl move… Boys and girls from both our classes shrieked. Even Takada-san took a step back.

I thought she would whisper, but Mai spoke as loud as if she was making an announcement. “Those who stand in the right are the ones who claim victory. You should have employed unflagging effort and sincerity. Instead, your methods will never measure up against those of my friends and I. Would you like me to demonstrate that to you?”

Takada-san hissed and reeled back like she’d been repelled. She blushed, probably from the sheer humiliation.

“Well, you’re the one who—” Takada-san began hysterically, but then she broke off and glowered at Mai. “Fine, by all means! Either way, we shall soon know the results! Be ready to taste defeat, Oduka Mai.”

As Takada-san raised a hand, as if to shower rose petals, Mai gave her a ferocious grin. “Likewise, what a shame it will be for you to get your long, pretty hair filthy.”

“What are you talking about?” Takada-san asked, half-angry and half-puzzled.

Mai shot back, “For when you lose, you shall have to grovel on the dirty floor and apologize to your classmates.”

Takada-san’s mouth fell open in a wordless scream. Everyone who

saw her would go on to talk about it later like, “Yeah, uh-huh. She exploded like an oil rig.”

Just as she started to scream in fury, the bell rang for class. We watched her sprint away with wrath written on her face, and then Kaho-chan popped out of the pack and exclaimed, “That was awesome, Mai-Mai! You sure told her! I’ve never seen you like this before.”

At her cue, all the Class A kids followed suit. “What a relief that’s over,” one said.

“Oduka-san, you’re so cool!” said another.

“Now all we’ve gotta do is win this thing!” said a third.

“Yeah, but we’ve as good as won in terms of class!”

They all spoke over one another, getting more and more hyped. One of the boys fist pumped and called, “Let’s win this thing! Justice for Sena!”

Ajisai-san, standing near the edge of the circle, yelled, “I’m still alive, you know!” which made us all burst into laughter.

I caught her eye and gave her a big nod. She was telling me she chose me over the rest of the class; she didn’t want revenge more than she wanted me to be okay. I was thrilled about that, but at the same time…that was really because the role of being a universally loved figure suited her so well.

Ajisai-san smiled charmingly. She cupped her hands around her mouth and mouthed “Good luck,” at me. God, she was so cute! I thanked my lucky stars I’d come to school today.

Just then, Mai noticed me and pulled me into the center of the circle. “Renako.”

“Wh-whoa!” I spluttered.

“This means we’re counting on you,” she said. She took my hand

almost as if we were ballroom dancing and beamed at me. I could feel all of our classmates' eyes boring into me. I didn't want to stand out! I really didn't want to stand out—however! I gotta say, this was worlds better than being ogled by a crowd while I stood on stage and made hopping noises.

I turned to look at the group. "L-leave it to me!" I said. I raised my fist in the air. I couldn't think of anything that great to say, but I decided that I might as well say something loud and assertive anyway! "I, Amaori Renako, will lead Class 1-A straight to victory!"

Everyone cheered. Before this, I'd been a member of Mai's friend group and the top of the school social pyramid, which had been pretty thrilling. But at the same time, it was also kinda just starting to sink in. Everyone listened to me, and I could rally a group with a couple of sentences. With one fist pump, I could make my mark on the class. This was it! This was being an extroverted people person, the most powerful force in school! Now it was time to do my damnedest to not damage the borrowed reputation of the queen who'd brought me here.

***

So yeah, I got that worked up over lunch break. Even I could acknowledge that I was having so much emotional turbulence I was scared of an overflow.

But now I waited alone, trembling, in a deserted area behind the school building. I'd noticed someone had left a slanderous note on my desk which I clutched in my hand. What had I done to deserve this? I was a nobody, just someone allowed to lap up the sweet nectar that came from being around the queen of the school!

The person who showed up before me and my too-long rap sheet

was the last one I'd ever expected.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she chirped.

"Y-you!" I cried.

She was one of Takada-san's friends, the one who kind of copied Ajisai-san: Haga Suzuran-san.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said.

"Well, no duh!" I said. "I had no choice but to make it after you sent me *this*!"

I brandished the paper at her. Its contents were as follows:

Amaori Renako,

I know your big secret. If you don't want it to get out, you'd better meet me behind the school buildings during lunch. Come alone.

"What do you know, Haga-san?" I asked. I was totally stiff. I wish I'd borrowed Satsuki-san's mom's taser before coming here.

And then, in the very next instant, Haga-san bowed deeply to me. "I'm so sorry!" she said.

"F-for what?" I quavered.

"Um, well, you know that whole letter thingy? Yeah, none of that's real."

"I-it's not real?"

"Yup."

"But you said you knew my big secret, so like, what's up with that…?"

"Oh, that's just 'cause you stand out as such a big people person," she explained. "I figure you gotta have one or two big secrets, y'know?"

“Uh, biased much?” I shouted instinctually. “Besides, I’m sure there’s a people person or two out there who doesn’t have secrets.” Mind you, I couldn’t think of any off the top of my head, but whatever.

“So that means you have one, right?” she asked.

Oh shoot! That was a trap!

“I have the right to remain silent,” I insisted.

No shit I had secrets; in fact, I might well have had more secrets than any other girl at Ashigaya. There was the matter of me being a loser in junior high. And then kisses with Satsuki-san. And my appearance in a cosplay competition the other day. Plus dating Mai. Not to mention Ajisai-san. Any one of those getting out would be more than fatal.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Haga-san said. “We’ve all hid a bad test score from our parents or blown too much cash on a phone game or, like, eaten too much chocolate in the middle of the night.”

“Right, true! I feel better.” She’d just made it even worse.

At any rate, I asked, “So, what’d you need me fo—wait a sec.”

I looked around us. Was this going to be like that thing the other day with Satsuki-san, but this time I was the one they’d lured in and ganged up on? Oh, heck no! The only reason Satsuki-san had survived that was because she was Satsuki-san! Sure, I may have been the first born in my family, but I was no Satsuki-san. I couldn’t handle this.

“N-no, it’s not like that,” she said. “Please don’t be so wary.”

She could say that, but like hell could I just go, “Oh, sure, if you say so.”

“You know, I was actually hoping to talk about Himi-chan,” she said.

“Himi-chan… You mean Takada Himiko-san, right?”

“Yes, but it’s not what you think,” she insisted. “Amaori-san, I’d like to ask you for a favor.” Once again, she gave me a huge bow. “I’m sorry. Um, I know this is asking way too much, but all the same…I really don’t have any other options, sorry.”

“Wh-what’s the favor…?” I asked.

She sounded like she was at her wits’ end. It sounded real, not like the letter she’d written earlier, and so pathetic I felt like I simply had to hear her out.

When she looked up, she couldn’t meet my eye. She whispered—-and I would never have expected this in a million years—“Amaori-san, would you please…give Himi-chan a handicap?”

I knew almost nothing of this group of Class B girls, never really interacted with them, and yet still got bothered by them all the same. And now they were asking me this ridiculous thing.

“Um, what?” I said. Did that mean… “You want me to throw the match?”

After a moment, Haga-san nodded slightly.

I didn’t bother to beat about the bush. “Nah,” I groaned. “No freaking way.”

Obviously, there was no freaking way I could do that for her. I felt a stronger sense of refusal than when Satsuki-san had asked me out. Did she want an easy win that badly? So she’d try to go after me, the weakest-looking member of my whole friend group?

As I recoiled from her request, Haga-san shook her head. “I mean, I just…I just can’t have Himi-chan lose.”

“Why not?”

Like a popped balloon with all the air leaking out of it, she said, “Because this match is a matter of life and death for Himi-chan.”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

She’d die if she lost? What the heck, when did this turn into a freaking death game? This was terrifying!

Haga-san stammered out her explanation. “See, Himi-chan’s always been hostile toward Oduka Mai even before the interclass athletics competition came up. I remember Himi-chan used to complain about how annoyed she was because Oduka Mai’s literally all anyone talks about here.”

Takada-san just talked shit nonstop, huh.

“I thought that her obsession with Oduka Mai was kinda weird, you know?” Haga-san continued. “And like it just got stranger as time went on. So I asked her about it, and it turns out Himi-chan used to be a model.”

“Wait, really?”

“Oh, you can’t breathe a word of this to anyone else, I’m serious! I think she’d be super embarrassed if anyone dragged up her old articles or something.”

Come to think of it, Takada-san did have the height for modeling… Dang, how many models *were* there in this one school? Tokyo, man. Incredible.

“But one day, the magazine that Himi-chan was in did a special on Oduka Mai,” Haga-san went on. “It sold so well, that…they dropped Himi-chan from the magazine… And Oduka-san stole some of her other jobs too. Himi-chan’s got a lot of pride, so she quit the modeling career as a whole.”

Oh…

“But in spite of all that, she refuses to let anyone outshine her at school. Like, she wants to win at school if nothing else, you know? She’s

really sincere about that. But at this rate, Oduka-san's gonna take away every place where Himi-chan can be herself."

Ah, so that's what Haga-san meant by it being a matter of life or death. It seemed like quite a few models around my age were impacted by Mai. There were probably tons of girls out there like Takada-san. I randomly happened to think back to the video Hanatori-san had shown me with Mai, Satsuki-san, and the crowd of little girl models behind them.

But with that being said… "That kinda feels like an unreasonable grudge," I said.

"Totally," Haga-san agreed. "But I still think that if she can beat Oduka-san, Himi-chan will be able to move on. Please, Amaori-san." She looked at me with everything she had. "Please. We'll apologize to Sena-san for what we did and everything… So would you, pretty please? Help us out, Amaori-san."

That was asking for too much.

"You can ask all you want," I said, "but I just can't. Sorry."

"Amaori-san!"

I couldn't bear to be there any longer, so I dashed away to outrun her stare.

Even if she was doing this for her friend, this was no fair. If she had the time to go preying on people's goodwill, then she could have used that to get more practice in! I mean, maybe she did practice. But you get what I'm trying to say. She could ask until she was blue in the face, but there was no freaking way I'd help her enough to *throw the whole game*.

But then, after I'd freed myself from Haga-san…

I got caught by the next person. “Please, Amaori-san,” she begged, executing a perfect ninety-degree bow. This was Kamesaki Chiduru-san, she of the long bangs and the somewhat inexpressive face. It was exactly like that time with Haga-san.

“Wh-what do you want?” I asked. “You’re not going to ask me to lose the competition on purpose, are you?”

It was a one-on-one with Kamesaki-san and me in the deserted outdoor walkway. Kamesaki-san jolted in shock and then nodded earnestly. “Yes, indeed,” she said. “I’ve never seen Himiko look so nervous before.”

I didn’t want to hear it, but Kamesaki-san started to explain the details of her own accord. “She always has confidence in spades, no matter what. It’s rare for her to express any insecurities. Now that there is no going back, she has no choice but to win. And if she loses, she’ll lose everything. She says that the rest of her high school experience will be ruined.”

The no-going-back part, I assumed, referred to how she knocked Ajisai-san’s pencil case off the desk. Yeah, to be fair, that was the moment when the rivalry between Class A and Class B ceased to be just a joke. Class A came together with Takada-san as our bad guy. But, I mean…she started it.

“You see,” Kamesaki-san went on, “Himiko has always been the type to get carried away or run with her incorrect impressions of things. And then she gets herself hurt. I just can’t bear to watch; it’s so risky. She’s a fool, you know. But this current episode is completely unlike all the rest.”

No way. I felt like she was telling me the backstory of some character I didn’t know. The only Takada-san I knew was the one who threw down with Mai. But now they kept on telling me that there was so

much more to her story than met the eye. *Please, I'd really rather stay out of it.* Or was this what Haga-san meant by me standing out?

"Please, Amaori-san," Kamesaki-san said. "I know it's wretched of me to ask, but I simply don't have any other alternatives. I know Himiko would be furious with me if she knew what I was doing, but all the same… Would you please?"

I stiffened as Kamesaki-san bowed before me. How come Haga-san and Kamesaki-san were begging me, of all people? Suddenly, the answer hit me.

There's always a *story* to the lives of extroverts. Let's take Oduka Mai for instance, as she's a good example. Mai cooked up her own story and pulled everyone in school, Takada-san included, into it—saving me when I became her friend, dominating over Satsuki-san as her rival, and more. That was just how Mai rolled. Now, if I had remained an asocial loser even in high school, and had I met Mai by chance for a moment—say she'd smiled at me in the library after school or kindly swapped two or three words with me—that would have become a treasured memory even after I'd graduated. That was the power of Mai's story. She was a popular, extroverted person, which gave her a kind of glowing presence. And Mai wasn't the only one with that. Satsuki-san, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-chan all influenced other people to this day.

And so maybe… Maybe from the moment Takada-san had knocked over Ajisai-san's pencil case and I'd gotten fired up and declared war, I'd accidentally crossed the threshold into such an existence. The thought frightened me.

"Sorry," I said, "but I just can't. That's not an option for me!"

"Oh, Amaori-san!"

I refused her plea. Making an impact on someone isn't always a good thing. If someone makes an unreasonable demand of you and you

refuse it, they can hold a grudge for no good reason. Which is absurd. But Mai had been hurt by such absurdity many times over, I knew. People talk about the price of fame, but I hadn't really considered it before. Standing out in the public eye meant that someone will come along and cast you as a character in their story without any of your input.

Miss me with that. Being a popular girl wasn't a privilege. It was a responsibility. But I couldn't be a part of so many people's lives. My communication juice ran out way too quickly, and my mental points recovered too slowly. Now that I was out of my league, status-wise, there was nothing I could do. Even when Haga-san and Kamesaki-san bombarded me with their feelings, saying it was for Takada-san's own good, I couldn't criticize them or try to persuade them that what they were doing was unreasonable. All I could do was build a wall and run away.

My breathing was ragged. While I took a short rest, someone behind me called, "Oh hey, Amaori-san! You got a sec?"

I turned to look. There stood the mysterious girl who aped Kaho-chan, both hands pressed together and an apologetic look on her face. Oh, for the love of god. Spare me.

***

"Rena-chin!"

"Huh?" I said. I looked up to see Kaho-chan standing there, frowning at me.

"You okay?" she said. "You're spacing out like crazy. You're not running another temp, are you?"

“Nah, no way,” I said.

The other girls and I had changed into our PE clothes before coming into the gym. Kaho-chan shoved a basketball jersey at me and pursed her lips. “Get it together, girl. It’s almost time for the big game!”

“Yeah, sorry. I guess I’m getting a little nervous.”

I pulled the jersey on over my PE clothes. My number was four—a pretty good one, I felt.

“Good luck to us, Amaori-san!” Hirano-san called.

“I-I’ll do my best to make this my greatest memory of high school,” Hasegawa-san promised.

I hurried to force a grin and nodded.

Satsuki-san, her hair tied back in a ponytail, tilted her head. “What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Huh?” I said. “Uh, nothing, really.”

“I see.”

Out on the sports field, the boys were playing futsal and the girls were doing softball. The boys’ volleyball and the girls’ basketball would be in the gym. On the next court over, the Class A boys huddled together, totally amped.

I heard cheers from the field outside. I couldn’t tell which, but I guessed one of the games had started. Finally, I snapped out of my tunnel vision.

There were four classes in the first year, A to D, but we didn’t do round robins or tournament style games here. It was just a simple A vs B, C vs D matchup. That meant we had only the one basketball game too.

“We gotta do our best, just like Mai-Mai and Aa-chan!” Kaho-chan said.

Oh yeah, we'd cheered for the softball match that started a bit ago. Class B had a lot of girls on the softball team, so their batting lineup was pretty impressive. But in spite of that, with Mai as pitcher, we struck them out one after another. Whenever Mai showed off her power as the star player, both guys and girls alike squealed in joy.

I lost track of how many matches we watched, but once class C and D's basketball game was done, we were called up to play. I could still feel the enthusiasm thick in the air in the gym.

And then there they were in front of me: the five members of the Class B gang, Takada-san included.

"It is finally time for the showdown, Quintet," Takada-san said.

Kaho-chan, standing in the center of our group, chuckled with pride and pointed straight at them. "We're gonna crush you flatter'n a pancake!"

Seeing the sparks beginning to fly, the onlooking boys oohed and aahed.

Our opponents were Takada Himiko-san, Haga Suzuran-san, Kamesaki Chiduru-san, Nemoto Miki-san, and…

"Thanks for having me today," said the last girl, a freaking giraffe of a strong, athletic-looking girl.

"Huh?" I said. "Not Youko-chan?"

Youko-chan stood on the narrow walkway on the second floor of the gym and gave us a big wave. "Good luck out there, guys!" she called.

"What the heck?!" I yelled. "How come you aren't on the 5déesses' team?"

Youko-chan laughed. "I'm not that good at sports!"

"That's no fair! That's no fair at all!"

Now even Kaho-chan joined in on the yelling. “Geh! You guys brought along the first-year ace of the basketball team, didn’t you?”

“She’s an honorary 5déesse for the day,” Takada-san said like it was nothing, not the bombshell it was. (Ace-san made a face like that was the last thing she wanted.)

“That’s fine,” Hirano-san said. “We’ve got a superstar who used to be on the basketball team too! Don’t we, Amaori-san?”

“Huh?” Her words upset me mightily, but I couldn’t say anything to lower the team’s morale just before the match. “Y-yeah, true. Yup, just leave it all to me! And then let’s get the ball to Satsuki-san whenever possible.”

“Okay!” Hirano-san said.

“Fine, if you insist,” said Satsuki-san.

And thus we lined up with questionable team unity. Ugh… Haga-san, Kamesaki-san, and Nemoto-san kept sneaking me pleading looks. I tried my best to drive those earlier conversations from my brain.

After her classmates talked, Takada-san tried to rally her troops too, saying things like, “We’ll win for certain!” and “No matter how many points they score, we’ll pay them back double!” and “Don’t be nervous now, girls.” You know, maybe she wasn’t such a bad person after all… Wait, but that’s what they wanted me to think! Was this all some strategy to throw me off mentally? Well, even if it wasn’t, it had the same effect.

Nope, nope, nope. Right now, the only thing on my mind had to be the game. I couldn’t let all those days of training with Kaho-chan and the other girls go to waste.

The teacher who was acting as the ref stood in the middle of the court with the ball. We’d start off with a jump ball. On the other side of the center circle stood, of course, Takada-san. And on our side, we

had…

"Get 'em, Rena-chin!" Kaho-chan cheered.

"Wait, what?!"

Kaho-chan pushed me out there.

"But Takada-san's got a good twenty centimeters on me!" I protested.

"Yeah, but you're the leader, aren'tcha?"

"Am I?" Since when? Well, then as the leader, I decided to delegate. "Please, Satsuki-san, take over!"

"I don't mind," she said.

Phew. Satisfied, I wiped the sweat from my brow. I'd completed my responsibilities as a leader. Kaho-chan stood next to me and gave me a Look that said, "Are you sure you can do that?" but, as our leader, I elected to ignore her.

The match was finally starting. I'd be okay. I'd be okay. I had Kaho-chan and Satsuki-san with me. Sure, our opponents may have been pretty tough, but I had good, reliable people on my side. Plus, I'd also try my best…to support Satsuki-san, that is!

Satsuki-san managed to get possession of the ball, and Takada-san harrumphed in anger. Kaho-chan grabbed the ball from where it fell.

"Time to go, go, go!" she said.

Nemoto-san tried to cut in, but Kaho-chan nimbly sidestepped her. She tried to pass to me to get it closer to the hoop, but—guess who was guarding me. The basketball ace. Uh, why?

"Uh, 'scuse me," I said, "um…"

The pressure was too great. I didn't think I could get past her!

While I was stuck, Kaho-chan passed it to Hirano-san, who sent it along to Satsuki-san, and…she leaped and launched a jump shot.

A Class B kid screamed, "Whoa!" The ball traced a stable parabola and swished through the hoop. It was a perfect throw, the kind of two-handed shot that was the go-to of female basketball players.

"You're rocking it, Saa-chan!" Kaho-chan crowed. "Now there's a girl who can get the job done!" She slapped Satsuki-san on the back.

"Oh my god…" Hirano-san gushed. "I passed a ball to Koto-san… and she scored with it!"

"Is that what they call teamwork?" Hasegawa-san said, overcome with emotion.

Heh heh heh. Now this was the true power of the Quintet… *Keep it up, Satsuki-san!* I thought.

The other team seemed pretty peeved. "They are indeed formidable foes," Takada-san said. "But we already knew that. We'll make up those points, girls!"

Her command meant it was time for us to go on defense. "All right," I told the others. "Let's bust out that strategy we talked about!"

"What strategy is this?"

While the other team frowned, we banded together in solid defense, a tactic bequeathed to me from my sister: put all members on defense! Any thrown-together team in an interclass athletics competition would be largely made up of amateurs, and their lack of team practices would make coordinated teamwork downright impossible. So, what was a girl to do?

"Lower their chances of making successful goals," my sister said, imparting to me some advice from a friend of hers as we sat in her room, "and then boost your chances at making good shots. It's going to

be pretty much impossible for an amateur to throw a three-pointer when they've got someone guarding them, see. So completely ignore anything outside the three-point line. If it goes in, switch it up. Have your guys go after the rebounds on any shots you don't make. That gives you guys more chances to score, and they should go down naturally."

It was a perfect, surefire way to win in a match of amateurs vs amateurs.

"Well, but I guess it only works if you can actually score goals," my sister added.

That's why I'd been focusing exclusively on practicing my shooting—well, that and because it was hard to learn intercepting passes, defense, dribbling, and all those other things! So when we were on defense, we'd all work together to pass the ball down court. Then we'd make sure not to miss when on offense and keep stealing their offensive opportunities. And that was Class A's strategy!

In fact, Suzuran-san tried to run up our side of the court with the ball, where she had her hands full with Kaho-chan and Hirano-san on defense. Since they blocked her from passing the ball forward, she passed the ball to the open Kamesaki-san. I made sure not to move forward any more than was needed but got in between her and Takada-san, who was closer to the hoop. Kamesaki-san looked stumped, so she tried shooting from where she stood, and…she missed!

Satsuki-san, already in the perfect position, snatched up the ball. Boy, that was a girl who was made for jumping high! Now it was our turn to take the offense. She passed the ball to Kaho-chan, who was already running.

"Hyah!" Kaho-chan yelled. She looked like she was about to shoot, but then she passed the ball to me.

Eeep. I almost fell for that feint of hers. *Just stay calm,* I told

myself. *And shoot. Shoot.*

Nice, it went in!

"4–0," Kaho-chan said. She high-fived me.

Woo-hoo! My sister's strategy worked like a charm. We'd win so long as we kept this up. This game was in the bag.

"The way you shoot one-handed is so cool, Amaori-san!" Hirano-san gushed.

"Oh, how the Quintet brings together the bonds of the ball…oh, god! I'm witnessing history in the making!" said Hasegawa-san.

I gave them both a thumbs-up and grinned. I couldn't believe it. I was actually pulling off something athletic. Well, all I'd done was get in position and make a successful shot, but still!

My sister's warning flashed through my mind. "The one flaw of this strategy is that you need to participate in both offense and defense, so it really eats up your stamina. You gotta keep a close eye on your base strength, okay?"

If this was a forty-minute game, there'd be no freaking way this strategy would work. But the interclass competition was ten minutes for the first half, an interval, and then ten minutes for the second half, so it was only half the length of a regular game.

"Let's keep it up until the end!" I said.

We were off to a great start. My sister had told me, "If everyone's motivated, not doing anything stupid to show off, following the strategy, and keeping teamwork as the number one priority, then your game's good as won." I wondered if that might actually be true. Or maybe it only worked out that way since everyone just kinda half-assed school events like this. But Class B was in it to win it too—maybe even more than we were.

So here's how it turned out.

At this point, the score was 12–15.

They somehow managed to flip the score by the end of the first quarter. Our all-hands on defense strat had worked great for a while. But then…

My only miscalculation was that girl from the basketball club. Once Takada-san figured out our strategy and started directing the others, they made it their goal to have the basketball girl throw three-pointers from outside the line. And since she was on the basketball team, after all, she threw them as well as a hotshot sniper. She didn't make a basket every time, but she was good enough that we couldn't ignore her. We tried having Kaho-chan, the second-best person on our team, guard her, but then that left no one to stop Takada-san. Those two were top players, but we only had the one star player in Satsuki-san. They kept up a fierce guard on her too, meaning she wasn't able to get as many points as we'd hoped. Since we'd all practiced a ton, we weren't making any big errors or anything; but at the same time, that practice hadn't made us stellar overnight either.

Just as Satsuki-san threw a layup and closed the lead by one point, Takada-san said, "Let's end this here and make an overwhelming lead."

She passed to Ace-san, and I had no idea which one was going to come at me. Plus, Satsuki-san had to stay near the hoop to catch the rebound. At this point, my only choice was to stop Takada-san myself!

"Why hello there, Amaori-san," Takada-san said.

"C-Class A's not about to lose on my watch," I told her.

"Oh? Pity, that."

Ace-san passed her the ball, and she glared at me. I cowered under

the intensity of her eyes. This was a matter of life and death to her, according to Haga-san. I could feel something like stubborn obsession in her stare. The rhythm of her dribbling changed. Here she came.

"It's a pity that you just aren't up for the task," she said.

"Wai—" I protested, but I couldn't stop her. Takada-san slipped past me like it was nothing and made a jump shot. The ball rocked the net. She'd earned two points with that last goal, so the first half ended with the score at 14–17.

We had a two-minute interval, and then it would be time to settle the score in the second half.

I bowed before all the others and said, "I'm sorry."

Satsuki-san, after wiping away her sweat with a towel, sighed and said, "What exactly are you apologizing for?"

"Urgh."

It wasn't just that I'd failed to stop Takada-san at the end there. It was the missing shots, the dropped passes…the whole shameful performance.

Suddenly, Satsuki-san placed her hand on my forehead.

"Huh?" I said.

"You aren't running a fever again. I see."

That startled me. "Why'd you think I would be…?"

"Because it appeared to me that you couldn't focus when we were on the court."

Well, I mean… I looked away from her, but then Kaho-chan folded her arms. "Even if she was super-duper focused, this is Rena-chin we're talking about, y'know?"

“That is true,” Satsuki-san acknowledged.

Was that her idea of backing me up? Well, thanks anyway, Kaho-chan…

“Anyway,” she said, “what’re we gonna do in the second half? I guess, like, stick to the strat but put more oomph in it and somehow turn this game around?”

“I think we’re too incompetent to manage that,” Satsuki-san said.

“What, you got any better ideas, huh, Saa-chan?”

“Isn’t this the time to discuss that?”

“True!” Kaho-chan recoiled like she’d been struck. Their slapstick antics made things feel a little less tense. “So, like, what’s the plan?”

Time was slipping away, and we hadn’t nailed down our core game plan yet. I noticed that Hirano-san kept glancing over at us. Ah ha! That was the characteristic behavior of an introvert trying to figure out when it’d be best to jump into a conversation.

“Hirano-san, do you have an idea?” I asked her.

“Huh? Oh, um, oh!”

When the conversation swung her way, all eyes turned to her. Oh shoot. Maybe that wasn’t a good thing!

Hirano-san looked dizzy, but she still managed to say, “I-instead of us all being on defense, what if we all went on the offensive?”

Then she squeezed her eyes shut, like she was amazed that she’d actually said it. I got it. There’s nothing scarier than the moment after you offer an opinion. That’s why I always had to follow it up with, “Oh, no, never mind. That wouldn’t work, sorry!”

Hirano-san flapped her hands. “Oh, um, never mind. Sorry, that wouldn’t work!”

Hasegawa-san nodded as Hirano-san said almost the exact same

thing I was saying mentally. “I don’t know, I think it could work… What do you guys think?”

“It’s possible.” Satsuki-san looked contemplative. “The problem at hand is that we cannot stop our opponents’ offense, no?”

“Y-yes, exactly,” said Hirano-san. “So if we can’t stop their offensive even when we all work together, they’ll only get a bigger lead on us… Oh, but that’s pretty nervy of me to say when I’m no help at all. I’m sorry.”

Kaho-chan stepped in after Hirano-san earnestly apologized. “So you’re saying to stuff defense and make this a contest to see who can score the most points, huh? That’s bold, Hiranon!”

“H-Hiranon…?”

Hirano-san blinked in shock and turned to look at me as I’d been silent up to this point.

“Yeah,” I said. I looked back at her and forced myself to sound optimistic. “I think that’s a great idea!”

“Oh no, but…”

“I mean, if we keep going the way we’re going, we might lose anyway. So why not give this a shot? I’d hate to go down without a fight.”

Kaho-chan pumped her fist and cheered. Satsuki-san said, “I agree.” For a moment, Hirano-san looked like she didn’t know what to do, but then Hasegawa-san met her eye and nodded in encouragement.

“So now we need to nail down the details,” I said.

“O-okay!”

If I’d been in Hirano-san’s shoes, I absolutely never would’ve been able to share my idea with the Quintet like that. Hirano-san was so brave, especially considering how much she venerated Satsuki-san.

But she'd said it herself, right? She loved the Quintet. That's why I wanted to win with her strategy and make good memories. I needed to get my head in the game too!

Yet when I looked at Class B, I saw them rallying each other and working their hardest to protect their lead. Both Class A—my crew—and Class B—Takada-san's people—were good friends, well practiced for this competition, and strongly motivated to win. So what was the difference between us? I had no idea.

Come to think of it, Ajisai-san had once told me that I was nice to everyone. And I think Satsuki-san had once said that, like, being a shy introvert made me considerate and let me relate to everyone on the basis of their insecurities. At the time, I hadn't really understood what they meant, but now, as we played this match, I got it. Only five students standing on the court right now could come away from this happy. The other five would feel the sadness of defeat. It was undeniably idiotic to let your sympathy for the losers influence your game, and I doubt that anything like that would have occurred to me if I'd been playing an online match against faceless opponents like I usually did. It really was better to not know anything about the person you were playing against.

I wasn't *nice*. I was just stupid.

As the second half of the match began, the nearby gallery of onlookers grew. Thanks to Takada-san constantly trying to start shit, this match had become a must-see for the first-years at Ashigaya High. Loads of people came to watch, including those from other classes. Well, even without Takada-san's shit stirring, Kaho-chan and Satsuki-san playing basketball was a sight for sore eyes. So I got it. If I still had

literally zero tolerance for public attention, like I used to, I wouldn't have even been able to dribble right with so many eyes on me. *Thanks a bunch, Rina Bun.*

Our strategy required Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san to hang around the hoops and defend it to the last while the other three of us wasted as little attention on defense as possible. Instead, we poured all our energy into offense. Naturally, we made little headway in stopping them from scoring, but we'd expected that to happen. Instead, we effectively countered them, and this was reflected in the scores. 16–17. 16–19. 18–19. 18–21. 20–21. We weren't exactly catching up completely, but neither were they expanding their lead. We were making it work somehow.

"They're persistent," Takada-san said.

"Uh-huh…" said Haga-san. "Not even our helper's stopping them."

They were both showing signs of fatigue now that they couldn't make their lead as strong as they would have liked.

"I expected nothing less from the Quintet," said Takada-san. "Where would the fun be if they weren't this strong?"

Regardless of how she felt deep down, Takada-san was still the picture of bravado. That's just what you had to do when you were at the head of the pack.

But we were also just as exhausted as our opponents.

"E-excuse me, Koyanagi-san," said Hirano-san.

"Yeah, what's poppin'?" panted Kaho-chan.

"Oh, it's nothing. It's just…are you all right?"

"Eh, yeah, I'll make it work. I trained a bunch, y'know?"

Kaho-chan used every bit of her nonexistent strength to flash a worried Hirano-san a peace sign. Actually, though, Kaho-chan was the

most fatigued of us all. She'd been guarding and been guarded by Takada-san, the keystone of offense and defense, for ages now, and that was way too big a responsibility. Even though it was only a twenty-minute game, she'd basically been running full tilt the entire time. But with that being said, we'd lose our rebounds if she and Satsuki-san switched places.

So I suggested, "Hey, Kaho-chan, want to swap places with me?"

"Nuh-uh," she said. "Not when we're finally doing well."

"But—"

"Look, I may not be athletic, but I've got a heck of a lot more enthusiasm in me than meets the eye." She wrinkled her brow at me. Urgh. "Even if I crash and burn later, I still think it's worth it to make good memories. I've never had a whole class come together like this, all hyped, y'know? So even if it's tough, it's fun. And I'm a-okay."

I paused to think for a moment. "Okay, fine."

Kaho-chan threw me a thumbs-up. And I got how she felt. I mean, I'd been so set on working my butt off that I contracted a fever.

"Just tell us if it gets to be too much, okay?" I said.

"Nuh-uh, I won't."

"Oh, come on!"

As we quibbled, Satsuki-san's calm voice cut in. "They're coming."

Satsuki-san was the only one whose performance hadn't suffered since the beginning of the match. It was baffling, since I'd never seen her exercise all that much prior to this. Did she have unlimited stamina or what?

Our scores were neck and neck, but it was so close I felt like I was balancing on a tightrope of spider silk. Yet that delicate balance had to snap sooner or later. If that happened while Class B was as tired as we

were, then maybe we'd get our second wind. If we could turn the tides, maybe things would go in Class A's favor.

However, the Goddess of Victory undeniably smiled on Class B.

Two of the players smacked together in midair and hit the ground with a dull thud. The spectators lost their minds, and I dashed over to the collision, just as flustered.

"Satsuki-san!" I cried.

Ace-san had been getting our rebounds for ages now, probably because we'd hurt the basketball club's pride, and for the latter half of this game, she'd been ticked off and challenging Satsuki-san to a fierce dogfight. Nevertheless, Satsuki-san moved like a butterfly, won the ball, and kept up the offensive onslaught. It had been one of those kinds of things.

"I-I'm sorry!" Ace-san said. She hurried to offer Satsuki-san a hand up.

Satsuki-san seemed totally unfazed and made to accept her hand when her face warped. "Ow…"

"Satsuki-san?!" I cried.

Satsuki-san frowned. "Quiet down. There's no need to make such a fuss."

"Where'd she hit you?" I asked.

"Nowhere." She held her ankle. "I just twisted my ankle a little."

We stopped the match for a moment, and both classes gathered around her. I looked at the crowd of people.

"I-is anyone here on the nursing committee?" I asked.

"I tell you, I'm fine," Satsuki-san insisted.

“No way, you’re not. Your poor ankle! You look like you’re in a ton of pain.”

“Not especially,” she said. “It’s fine. I’m just not very good at handling pain. I even cry when I get my vaccine shots.”

Kaho-chan swooped in to rebut, “Saa-chan, you wouldn’t react even if you got chomped by a crocodile.”

Oh, for heaven’s sake—now wasn’t the time to be joking around!

But Satsuki-san said peevishly, “If I duck out now, will you still be able to beat Class B?”

“No, but…”

We didn’t have any players to swap in, so the rules said we could find someone else—or, failing that, someone on Class B could drop out as well, and we’d continue with four versus four. There wasn’t even a full four minutes left on the clock. But they were still three points ahead, as ever, and with Satsuki-san out of the running, we stood zero chance of pulling ahead. But at the same time, there was no freaking way she could play like this. Yet…

Kaho-chan said what we were all thinking. “Not like things’ll go any better if you try and ignore the pain, Saa-chan.”

I was a little surprised. Kaho-chan was plenty outspoken, but I hadn’t expected her to be so straightforward even with Satsuki-san.

Satsuki-san looked away, like Kaho-chan had hit a nerve.

Takada-san came up to us. “Well, I suppose this is as far as you can go.”

“Not exactly,” Satsuki-san said. “I can keep playing.”

“Kindly don’t lie to me. Your ankle will only swell up worse.”

The basketball ace girl, the one who’d hurt Satsuki-san, blanched.

Satsuki-san addressed her, trying her hardest not to let emotion

cloud her words. “Don’t worry. It wasn’t your fault. I have no plans to take revenge on you later.”

“O-okay.”

She probably meant it as a joke, but the fact that she hadn’t meant it didn’t make it any less scary…

As everyone looked on, Satsuki-san wobbled to her feet. “Honestly…” she sighed. “What an undignified exit.”

“Satsuki-san…”

I offered her a hand, and she looked at me. “And with this, we’ve now set the stage.”

Wait a sec. She wasn’t looking at me. Satsuki-san was staring past me at something else.

“I see you’re in quite the bad situation,” a voice behind me said. I turned to see a beautiful girl standing in the open doorway to the gym. “Perhaps I should lend my assistance.”

Golden hair aflutter, it was Oduka Mai.

Takada-san spat the name with vitriol. “Oduka Mai!”

“I was hoping to finish up in time to cheer you on, but are you by any chance in need of a substitute player?” Mai asked as she walked over from the gallery.

All the onlookers oohed and aahed, like “Are we about to see a showdown between the queens of Class A and Class B?”

Haga-san shouted above the hubbub, “H-hold on a sec! You can’t switch in a new person over fifteen minutes into the match. It’s not fair to bring in someone who’s all fresh and ready to go!”

She did make a good point.

“I agree, this is a task that requires the ability to stay on one’s feet for hours, and I do still have the energy for it. But with that being said, I *have* only just finished pitching an entire game of softball. Will that satisfy you?”

“Geh.” When Haga-san faltered, Mai’s attention turned to Takada-san.

“Takada Himiko-san,” she said. “I find it difficult to believe that you could boast about your victory over my class without vanquishing me as well. So, how about it?”

In front of so many people, and faced with such a provocation, Takada-san’s answer was obvious. “Why not?” she said. “In fact, this is excellent. All I want is complete and total victory over you. Now, let us be off to the courts, Oduka Mai!”

Mai chuckled. “Let’s.”

Satsuki-san, now being supported by a girl on the nursing committee, sighed in exasperation. “Mai,” she said. “You know what I’m going to say, right?”

“But of course. I’ll win for you too. It would never sit right with you if I didn’t, would it?”

“It wouldn’t make much difference to me either way,” she said. “I’m not that invested, personally. But make sure you win for *her*.”

Satsuki-san nodded to one more girl who’d run over after her own game was finished, the girl now nervously watching everything go down: Ajisai-san.

“S-Satsuki-chan!” she cried.

Satsuki-san raised a hand nonchalantly.

Mai smiled. “Yes, but of course. Which is another way of saying that I’ll win for you as well, no?”

“You don’t listen, do you?” Then Satsuki-san suddenly turned in my direction. “Amaori.”

“Uh, yeah?”

I stepped closer, and she grabbed my chin. “Bwuh!” I spluttered.

“I don’t know what it is that’s on your mind, and I really couldn’t care less about whatever’s stopping you from focusing,” she said in a stern voice. “However, I need you to understand that making a choice wipes out all other options. Make sure that gets through your thick skull.”

Her eyes seemed to be staring deep into my very soul. “Swatshuki-shan…” I mumbled.

Satsuki-san snorted. “You look so ugly like this.”

“Um, rude?!” I screamed as I shook her off.

“Well, I say that. But I still haven’t given up.”

“Huh?”

And then she staggered away, leaving me with that final mysterious comment. My heart was pounding. Wh-what on earth was that all about?

But, yeah, okay. As Satsuki-san left, Ajisai-san called out to her cheerfully before joining the crowd of spectators once again. I looked at her worried expression, and then took a big gulp of air. I was biased, yeah. But I’d promised, hadn’t I? And Ajisai-san had chosen me—me, in all my indecisive, incompetent, half-assed glory—just like Satsuki-san had said. I’d made up my mind that this was important to me. And when it was this late in the game, that made my priorities undeniable.

“Mai!” I called, startling everyone around me. I’d never called her anything but Oduka-san at school before.

But Mai merely looked back at me with a smile. “Yes?”

The scales were finally lifted from my eyes. It was all about doing things for the ones I loved. It was all about doing things *with* the ones I loved.

"Mai," I said, "let's win this thing."

Mai chuckled and placed her hand on my head. "I have it covered. I'm your Goddess of Victory, after all."

That was just so cool that I found myself at a loss for words.

The game resumed with Class A's ball. I gave Mai a simple rundown of our strategy so that she could fill in the spot left by Satsuki-san. But then when Kaho-chan dribbled past the line of our opponents, Takada-san stole the ball from her all too easily. Kaho-chan squawked.

"Oduka Mai!" Takada-san called.

"My goodness," Mai said. "Eager to bring on the finale, are we?"

It was a one-on-one contest. Mai crouched low before Takada-san. It looked almost like a shoot-out that no one could intrude upon. Even the bystanders were fully silent, watching with bated breath.

"I'll defeat you and reign supreme over the school!" Takada-san declared.

"To be frank," Mai said, "I have no interest in this supremacy contest of yours at all."

"I beg your pardon?"

"But if I lose, you see, my friends will be upset," said Mai. "That's why I have no choice but to play like I mean it."

"No one asked you!"

Takada-san changed up the rhythm of her dribbling. Here it came again. I couldn't so much as react, because by the time I even noticed what was going on, she took off in the opposite direction. I assumed the

worst and ran in to cover for Mai.

"Watch and learn," Mai said. And suddenly, the ball was in her hand.

"Wha—?!" Takada-san's eyes bulged.

Mai dribbled her way down to the other side of the court.

"We won't let you get away with this!" Haga-san cried.

"No matter how good you may be, we have numbers on our side!" said Kamesaki-san.

"Uh-huh. We're gonna stop you for sure," added Nemoto-san.

All three girls ran up to surround Mai. There was no way she could break out of that tight circle—but then, like a light shining through a copse of trees, Mai slipped past them all.

Last, Ace-san made to block Mai from the goal by jumping into the path of her ball, but Mai leaped, transferred the ball from one hand to another in midair, and…well, of course it went in. That move's called a double clutch.

"All right," she said. "Three minutes left now, is it?" Her blonde ponytail swayed like the tail of Pegasus. "A lead of three points is nothing, wouldn't you say? Ah, and now they're only ahead by one."

God, Mai! Oh heck, what was I to do? I don't think I'd ever seen her look this cool before. This freaking girl, I'm telling you. This *freaking* girl!

Takada-san had the ball. She shouted to Ace-san, the girl who'd accidentally hurt Satsuki-san. "She only got past us because we had our guard down! Even Koto Satsuki could have stopped that. Now, don't just stand there all shocked. Get it together!"

The fire returned to Ace-san's eyes. *Oh great,* I thought. *Now it'll be harder to get past her.* But Mai didn't seem concerned in the slightest.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Why, that's because Satsuki is hardly athletic," she said. "She's quite the bookworm, after all."

Kaho-chan waved her hand in a forceful "no" gesture. "Uh, if Saa-chan's not athletic, what does that make us? Invertebrates?"

"Wow," I said. "This is what happens when Mai gets serious!"

Kaho-chan and I were, at this point, 100 percent viewing her like we were part of the crowd. Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san, meanwhile, were so gaga over her that they had hearts in their eyes.

"Ooh, the queen of the Quintet," Hirano-san squealed. "Oduka Mai-sama!"

"She's just too beautiful," Hasegawa-san said. "I wish I could take everything my eyes are seeing right now and save it on a hard drive."

And then, before I even realized what was going on, Haga-san moved in to the center of Class B and instructed the others. "Even Oduka Mai can't stop all of us. Let's give an all-out offense our best shot!"

She was right. Takada-san switched up to guard Mai, so I took over watching Ace-san while Kaho-chan got to take a little breather. But they did whatever it took to score whenever someone passed the ball to them, so their lead didn't shrink. Maybe because Class B was so focused—or so tenacious—they didn't miss any more shots, thus robbing us of our chance to get rebounds. Now Class B was in perfect unity. Oh, the irony—Her Royal Majesty was just so strong that her very presence lit a fire under Class B.

"We gotta make sure Himi-chan wins!" Haga-san said.

"Uh-huh! And we only have a little more to go!" Nemoto-san responded.

Mai scored us a point, but Class B's teamwork wrested the shot away. In a complete reversal from the first half of the game, it was now, oddly enough, a scramble for points just as Hirano-san's strategy dictated. The match went first in our favor and then in theirs as we took turns attacking and defending, but the only major development was that time was running out.

36–37. And there was precious little time left, only enough for one more play.

The ball went to Takada-san. Once again, the person who faced her head-on was none other than Mai.

"Why is it always you?" Takada-san snarled.

Mai said nothing.

"Don't they say that people who already have it all wind up with everything? Is that the way things work? Listen—someone like you will never be able to understand how I feel."

"You are right," Mai said. "I have been blessed with many privileges."

"Exactly! Which is why I need to win! If I don't, then I'll have nothin—"

"And yet," Mai said. She narrowed her eyes quietly and said in a low voice, "I must ask you to engage in self-reflection. Don't you have something wonderful too? Don't you have something that no one else can beat?"

I could hear the following unspoken words: *That's the thing that Renako taught me.*

Then Mai stole Takada-san's ball and dashed away. Takada-san's eyes opened wide in surprise, and she whipped her head around.

And then there were Takada-san's dear friends from Class B.

“We’re going to stop you this time, I swear!” one of them cried. They blocked her path, looking almost as if they wanted to jump down her throat.

Mai danced past one and then the other. But before she could slip past the third, the other two stubbornly followed hot on her tail. Mai stopped. There was no more time. For a single moment, her eyes darted in both directions.

There I was, before the hoop. I knew. I knew she couldn’t force her way through the girls and make it to the hoop. That’s because this was a victory that all of us in Class A had to make together.

Mai threw the ball to me. Someone—a girl from Class B—screamed. “No, Amaori-san!” The voice of that girl who thought of Takada-san as a dear friend wound around my wrist like a thorny vine.

I got down into the right stance to make a shot, in the one-handed style I’d practiced. It felt hard to breathe.

Every single person out there wanted happiness. If not their own happiness, then someone else’s. Someone they loved. It was one of those things you put your heart and soul into.

“Please!” she called. “Please miss!”

But see, for me?

“Don’t let it go in!” she yelled.

It wasn’t about which of us was right or wrong.

“Miss, miss!”

I wanted my loved ones to be happy. And you know why? Because I’d already made my decision. *I*—me, not anyone else—had decided to try my best.

“Rena-chan!” Ajisai-san yelled. “You can do it!”

My body felt light as I tossed the ball. It soared through the air tracing the path of a rainbow after a storm. And then…it went in.

The score ticked up: 38–37.

The whistle blew. The ref called, “The match is over!” Those words shook the stifling, sauna-like atmosphere in the gym. Class A had won.

“I…” I muttered. Right at the end there, I hadn’t even been aware that I’d thrown the ball. My body just moved on instinct, like when I shot targets while staring down at them through the crosshairs of my gun. It didn’t even feel real.

Mai came up to me. “I knew you could do it, Renako.”

“I…did it?” I asked. “I won us the game?”

“You did. You scored the final shot.”

I looked down at my fingers. “I did it…”

I never once imagined that I’d be putting a ton of effort into a sport like this. Not only had the idea of me going all-out in an inter-class athletics competition been ridiculous to me, I would never in my wildest dreams have imagined the whole class cheering for me, let alone having friends and romantic partners in high school.

My fingers trembled. “I did it… I won.”

There was a sense of elation inside me unlike any I’d ever felt before. This was what it felt like to accomplish something.

“Rena-chin!” Kaho-chan yelled, pulling me into a hug.

“Whoa!”

“Careful there.” Mai caught me as Kaho-chan bowled me over.

“You were incredible!” Hirano-san said as she and Hasegawa-san rushed up. Both were moved to the point of tears. “I was completely blown away.”

“I’m going to remember this for the rest of high school,” said Hasegawa-san. “No, scratch that. My whole life, my time spent reincarnating, and the life after that too!”

Ajisai-san and Satsuki-san, back after getting her ankle looked at, stood to the side of the court. Satsuki-san looked self-satisfied, like it was only a matter of course that we’d won, and Ajisai-san was weeping.

Thanks, Ajisai-san, I thought. She was the one who’d given me that final push of support to make the ball go in. Or that’s how it felt, at any rate. Oh, shoot. Now that I was thinking about how it was all over, I started to tear up. I tried to hold the waterworks at bay. I should keep a smile on my face! I mean, we’d won and everything!

“I knew you had it in you!” Kaho-chan said. “You did it! And frick you for stealing the moment of glory right at the end!”

“Whoa, Kaho-chan. What’re you tickling me for? Hey, stop!” I burst out laughing.

But just then, I happened to look at Class B. The basketball star girl once again bowed to Satsuki-san. Satsuki-san sighed before extending her hand, and the two shook. I wondered if the girl had just invited her to join the basketball club. Basketball club Satsuki-san sounded pretty darn cool to me.

Yet, meanwhile…Takada-san crumpled to the ground on the spot as her other teammates crowded around her. It wasn’t enough to make me feel bad, but I still wondered if I should say something to her.

After we all stood in a row and bowed to one another, Youko-chan came over. “Congrats, Renako-kun,” she said.

“Yeah, thanks, Youko-chan.”

She stood in front of Takada-san and the others like she was guarding them and smiled ruefully. “I guess, like, you should maybe leave us alone for a while. Sorry. I know it’s a selfish thing to ask.”

“Nah, not at all.”

No one in the Quintet was the type to go kicking Takada-san when she was already down. So long as she apologized to Ajisai-san later, once she was all calmed down, we were chill.

“To be real with you,” Youko-chan said, “I’m kind of surprised. I didn’t think you guys would beat Himiko-chan. You’re something else, you know that, Renako-kun? I guess it’s ’cause you’ve got that special something.”

“No one’s ever said that to me before,” I said.

I think she thought I was trying to be modest, and she laughed. “Or maybe,” she said, “it’s ’cause of the power of love.”

“Wait, what?!”

Youko-chan giggled right into my ear and whispered, “You and your wifey have fun now, ’kay?”

“Wait, no, stop—you have the wrong idea!”

That misunderstanding was *still* coming back to haunt me!

But while Youko-chan was still deluded, my (fake) wifey lifted both her hands in the air and shouted, “All righty! Let’s go out and paaaaar-tay!”

I guess the class had plans to hold a party to celebrate our victory, although I’d heard nothing about it beforehand. Wait, was I invited? If, after all this, I wasn’t allowed to go, I’d seriously break down and cry. They say there are only three moments in a girl’s life where she can cry: when she’s born, when she dies, and when she gets left out of a party.

“Uh, duh,” said Kaho-chan. “Of course you’re invited.”

Oh, thank god she confirmed that for me. Thank god indeed.

But then she immediately broke out into a grin and teased me. "You 'n me can have our *own* happy ending at a love hotel party later."

"Uh, let's not!"

If Youko-chan heard her say that, the misunderstanding was only going to be compounded! *Kaho-chan, could you cut it out?* And besides, I already had two girlfriends, thank you very much!

That's how I said goodbye to the interclass athletics competition. It was a whole hullabaloo from start to finish, an event that left me exhausted mentally and physically. But when it was all done, I thought, *Yeah, you know what? That was pretty fun.* And I don't mean just the competition either. All the practice I did in the park was included too. It was all about that feeling of accomplishment: not just doing the stuff you already knew you could do but learning how to do new things too. I think I might have overdone it just a tad…but hey, even I could acknowledge that I'd really tried my best here.

It was still difficult for me to walk alongside these four very special people I admired, but you know… When everyone sang my praises at the diner where we held our party, I felt maybe, ever so slightly, like I was getting cool with it. It wasn't so bad to give folks compliments.

Group Chat Name:5déesses (4)
Part 5

Star Lily: …Good job, guys.

Crane-chan: Well, they got us good, didn't they?

Star Lily: So that Amaori Renako-chan, huh? She beat us right at the last second.

Crane-chan: I always thought she was such a meek, cute, girly-girl too.

miki: I wouldn't have guessed it, but she's got some backbone to her.

Crane-chan: And she must have put quite a bit of practice into making baskets.

Star Lily: She's not a member of the Quintet for nothing, that's for sure.

Star Lily: Do you think she's maybe the real leader of the Quintet but just pretends to be harmless?

Crane-chan: Now that you mention it…

miki: And didn't she call Oduka Mai by her first name?

Crane-chan: Could there be a shred of truth to this?

Star Lily: Ugh, whatever!

Star Lily: I'm just pissed that she didn't let Himi-chan win, even after we pulled that stunt!

Queen: What stunt?

Star Lily: Huh? Himi-chan?!

Queen: Whatever are you talking about?

Star Lily: Oh. Um. Ah ha. Nothing.

Star Lily: Wait, are you calling me?!

Crane-chan: Ahem. Well.

Crane-chan: S-speaking of Amaori-san, I see she and Terusawa-san are quite close.

miki: Y-yeah, for sure.

Crane-chan: Terusawa-san doesn't have any friends, but she talks to everyone. It makes for rather an odd relationship.

miki: For real.

miki: And you know like when we first went to go challenge Class A? She kinda tagged along there too all of a sudden.

Crane-chan: …You know, come to think of it, why do we call ourselves the 5déesses when there are only four of us?

miki: 'Cause there's five in the Quintet. We'd be outnumbered with the 4déesses, y'know?

miki: I was all for us being the 500,000,000déesses, but Suzuran-chan put her foot down.

Crane-chan: If you named this group the 500,000,000déesses, I would leave.

miki: …Yeah, that's fair.

Epilogue

AFTER EVERYTHING, I THINK the rewards I got for trying my best might have been going a *little* overboard.

I stood in front of the girls' bathroom mirror, my face as stiff with anxiety as if I'd used glue in place of lotion. Once the competition was over, my muscles were sore as hell and my poor health came back, but I managed to get past all of that somehow. Now it was after school a few days later. The weather was great, a late burst of warmth, even though we were creeping into fall.

I left the bathroom and set off. When I'd gotten the message last night that said, "I'll wait for you on the roof after school tomorrow," I didn't know what to respond with apart from an OK stamp, but I'd been worried sick ever since. My heart was beating so fast I felt like it was about to explode. If I met Ajisai-san in this condition, I figured I'd straight up die on the spot.

We all knew what this "reward" entailed: a *kiss from Ajisai-san*.

I groaned and clutched my chest. To be real with you, I was still torn over whether or not I was down for this. By "still," I mean "now and forever," mind you. I'm pretty sure a good twenty thousand years could pass, mankind would have settled in outer space, and I'd *still* be on the fence about it.

But I'd already made my decision. I'd tried my best, and now here was a kiss as my reward. Yeah, maybe I would be confused as heck to pick up Excalibur in the first dungeon, but getting the holy sword in the final dungeon came with a real sense of accomplishment, a feeling like "Wow, I've really come this far?" And that's what this was. Well…I

mean, it'd all felt super difficult while I was doing it, but now that it was over, could I really say that the practice and the match were a big enough deal to warrant a kiss from Ajisai-san? Wouldn't you need to, like, defeat an NBA-level team to deserve a kiss? Oh god, I was getting scared as heck. See, with Mai and Satsuki-san, there'd been that element of surprise. Now that I had plenty of time to put myself in the right mindset, I couldn't remotely get in the zone at all!

I looked up at the stairs leading to the roof and balled my hands into fists. Okay. You know what? Time to skedaddle. With the positive light of egress shining in my eyes, I made an about-face. Just to be on the safe side, I figured I should fall down the stairs and break a bone or two by way of an excuse.

And just as I was possessed by those dirty, rotten thoughts, someone said, "Amaori-san, may we borrow you for a moment?"

"Huh?"

There stood Takada-san, with three other girls flanking her.

Well, that solved the bone issue. Think they'll stop after just one?

They took me out behind the school building. I backed away for dear life until I bumped up into a wall.

"Wh-what's all this about?" I stammered. "Is this payback because you lost? What, are you going to take turns beating us all up? Am I your first target?"

Or was this divine punishment for trying to run away mere moments before I met Ajisai-san? Please, God! That was only my imagination running wild! You know I could never defy one of your angels, right? *This is going too far!*

I was on the verge of begging for my life in tears when, completely

without warning, Takada-san bowed to me. “I most sincerely apologize,” she said.

“H-huh? What for?”

Ajisai-san was the one to apologize to, not me. But she’d already done that to make up for all the trouble the four of them had caused. So, to my mind, there shouldn’t have been anything else for us to talk about.

“My friends told me what they did to you,” Takada-san said.

“Right, and what was that again?”

Wait, was I legit going to come away from this without getting thrashed? Are you sure?

Just then, Haga-san, standing at the back of the pack, recited like she was reading off of a pre-written apology, “We…asked you to throw the match for us.”

“Oh, that.”

“Honestly!” Takada-san yelled. The other three behind her flinched. “Of all the horrid things! My blood just about boiled when I heard about it afterward. You can’t seriously believe I’d be happy if that’s what made us win. I am well and truly disgusted with all of you.”

“I-I’m sorry, Amaori-san,” Kamesaki-san sniffled through tears. “I’m so sorry.”

Oh, thank god. So they weren’t about to put me in a concrete overcoat.

Relieved, I reassessed the situation. So, Takada-san had brought the other three with her to apologize to me over the whole interclass athletics competition debacle, huh? Okay, that made sense. And now that I thought about it, that request of theirs *had* been pretty infuriating…

“Uh, Takada-san,” I said. “I’m not bothered about it anymore. So you don’t need to be so upset at them.”

Takada-san lifted her eyebrows, evidently surprised. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean, they were just trying their best, right? To make Class B—or, well, you—win. Sure, they might not have gone about it in the best way, but it was all to help you out, right?”

Surprised, the other three girls looked to me as one. Takada-san frowned. “I am extremely reluctant to have it thought that this was done on my behalf.”

“Well, I mean—”

“However!” Takada-san took a deep breath, like she was a flamethrower. “Given that you are the party who was affected by their actions, I’m afraid I don’t have a leg to stand on.”

Without turning around and her head still hung low, she addressed the other three. “Girls, please don’t ever do this again… That is, if you really are doing it for my sake.”

Each of her friends looked disheartened as they responded to her.

Yeah, when we do things based on our own good intentions, we never know how the other person will take it. I’ve had situations like that too. For instance, I thought it was nice to offer to pay when I went on my trip with Ajisai-san, but she thought it’d be a good thing to pay for the whole trip herself. We had a conflict of values, which turned into a whole thing—but in the end, we managed to figure it out without shit hitting the fan. I guess it all boils down to talking it out, you know? What can you both do for each other? And how will it make them feel? I mean, it’s still bad to go bothering other people like these three did. Also, wait—Ajisai-san was waiting for me!

“If we’re done here,” I said, “I have to bounce.”

“Oh, yes,” Takada-san said. “I suppose I’ve never told you why I’m so fixated on Oduka Mai, have I?”

“Huh?”

I mean, I already knew. But if I were to tell her that I’d heard from Haga-san, that’d be breaking my promise to her.

I hemmed and hawed before going, “Y-yeah, I guess not.”

“Well, we’ve caused you quite a lot of trouble this time around. So very well, I shall divulge my hidden shame to you and you alone. You see, it all began back when I was in fifth grade…”

She got a faraway look in her eyes as she put her hand on her chest. W-well, so long as she kept this short, I guess it would be fine… I’d just have to book it to the roof once she was done… Uh-huh…

However, Takada-san’s solo performance did not seem to be hurrying toward a conclusion.

“And then it was as if a bolt of lightning ran through my body,” she said. “Ah, how gorgeous she was, I thought. I had no idea a person so beloved by Venus could truly exist.”

And later: “It was complete defeat. I was utterly dejected. But that left me with two future options: to accept my fate or reject it. In order to protect myself, I turned against Oduka Mai.”

And: “Yet I never expected to see her again. In Ashigaya High, no less! Oduka Mai had already become a figure in my mind that I could never accept. Now, I had no choice but to treat her with hostility. That is why I decided to reign over Class B as its queen.”

And: “This curse of mine has endured so long… Though I may be but a young maiden of sixteen, it truly was a long, long curse to bear. But I now recognize my defeat, and so perhaps I can finally move on.”

You know what was long? Her story!

I wanted so darn badly to yell that, but this seemed so important to her that I couldn't bring myself to rain on her parade. This was what it meant to be popular, and I guessed this was also what it meant to get dragged into someone else's business. Huh. Being a popular girl's not all fun and games, was it?

Takada-san detoxed herself as she talked and then extended a hand to me with a clear smile. "And that is all thanks to you," she said. "Amaori-san, you are really such a lovely person, albeit a rather odd one. Still. Thank you very much. I am glad we had the opportunity to meet."

"Y-yeah, no problem."

I quickly took Takada-san's hand. It was a perfectly girlish hand. She, too, was another person whose life had been turned upside down by Oduka Mai. A wave of sympathy washed over me. First Satsuki-san, then Hanatori-san, and now a third victim had been added to the list. Wait, shouldn't I count too? Eh, best not to think about it too deeply. Ajisai-san was waiting.

"O-okay," I said, "I think I'd better get going now."

"And yet we cannot relive the same dreams we once had when we were young," Takada-san went on. "The little girl who yearned for such a glamorous career is no more. But instead, I now have wonderful friends who cherish me dearly. Ironically, I would never have discovered that if not for Oduka Mai." She giggled.

Wait, what?

"Suzuran-san, I must have caused you no end of trouble. But you've saved me repeatedly with your simple kindness."

“Oh, Himi-chan… It means so much to me to hear you say that,” Haga-san gushed.

Oh god, was this the start of the Takada Himiko Story: Season 2 or something?!

“Now that I think about it, meeting you—”

And hold the phone. Was it *absolutely* necessary for them to have this conversation right in front of me? I legit had things to do, people! No more depositing your feelings in the bank of Amaori Renako. I didn’t offer that service any longer!

I stuck my hand out to interrupt. “Hold on, please,” I said desperately. “Hey, uh, hold on please! Listen, I’ll call in someone to stand in for me. You can tell all this to her.”

And then I placed a call. *Please, please let her be somewhere on campus still!*

My life fundamentally refused to go the way I wanted it to at times like this, but today was different, because I was keeping Ajisai-san waiting. My action had Ajisai-san’s blessing!

“Heya!” said the girl who picked up the phone. “What’s poppin’, Rena-chin?”

“Kaho-chan, please do me a favor! Come rescue me!”

“Huh?”

And thus I (by offering Kaho-chan as a replacement me) broke out of Takada-san and co.’s siege. Kaho-chan was going to be furious at me for this, I figured. But oh well! I’d apologize to her a ton later once it was all over.

I dashed up the stairs to the roof. God, at this point, I didn’t even feel the urge to run away any longer. *I’m sorry! That really was just my*

imagination running wild! Please, God, quit giving me your divine punishment.

Maybe Ajisai-san was a real stickler for time, and she'd been like "If someone doesn't value every second of their time, then I don't want to spend a second around them," and already gone home. Maybe this was the end of our relationship. *Please, Ajisai-san!* I begged. *Please still be here!*

Almost on the verge of tears, I grabbed the knob and threw the door open. Was Ajisai-san there?! She was! She stood behind the railing, her hair waving in the wind.

"Oh, Rena-chan," she said, with a small wave and a smile lacking so much as an iota of unhappiness. She was just practically bursting with cuteness.

When I saw her, for some reason I couldn't fathom, I felt oddly moved. "Ajisai-san!"

My shadow lengthened as I staggered out onto the roof. It wasn't just that she was adorable bathed in the afternoon light. She looked really, incredibly beautiful.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said.

"Oh no, don't worry about it." She smiled as if it really was no big deal at all. "Honestly, I'm really fine with having to wait a little, because I live with the kiddos. And then when I'm late, I call and let them know to come meet me, so it's nothing to worry about."

"Ugh, I'm sorry. And here I was trying to do my best so that I'd never make you feel lonely like this again…"

"I wasn't lonely, though." She put her hand on her chest and grinned. "Because I was thinking about you the whole time."

"Ajisai-san…"

I stopped in front of her, so close that we could touch if we each reached out.

Ajisai-san giggled. “To be honest, I was just thinking about going to wait for you in the classroom. But I thought other people might see me, so I decided to stay up here.”

“R-really?”

“Mm-hmm. You know, this brings me back. Remember the time you told me you liked me over and over again? I can’t believe that was already half a year ago.”

“O-oh, wow.”

That must have been the time I tracked Mai down to the hotel in Akasaka. Back then, I was terrified of turning down people’s invitations, so I’d frantically tried to ensure Ajisai-san wouldn’t get the wrong idea. Hey, wait a minute. That was one of those things best kept buried in the past.

“Hey, you know what?” Ajisai-san said timidly. Her cheeks were red, the same color as the setting sun. “I think that was when I started to…see you in a certain light.”

“Really…?”

“It’s funny, don’t you think? Girls tell each other they like one another all the time. But I guess, like, there was something so *real* about the way you said it.” She placed both hands across her chest as if that was where she stored all the important things she had to say. “It made me realize you really, really actually liked me. And so that’s why the reverse happened. That’s when I started catching feelings for you.”

“Y-you’re making me blush.”

This was such an embarrassing memory for me that I wanted to completely forget about it, but man. She saw me like that, huh? Looking

back on it, I really had cared for Ajisai-san at the time, but I didn't think of her in a girlfriend kind of way. Still, remember what Ajisai-san said to me? Maybe my definition of a best friend was what some other people would define as a girlfriend. So, if it made everyone happy…what's the harm in dating, you know? I'd chilled out about that. The way I cared for her now wasn't any different than it used to be. And besides…we now got to do things we couldn't unless we were dating. That was nerve-racking, sure. But I didn't entirely dislike it.

"Rena-chan, you're bright red."

Well, that's because Ajisai-san was smiling all too cutely. Hiding my embarrassment, I half-heartedly shot back, "P-pot, meet kettle."

"Huh?"

She put her hands to her cheeks, her eyes wide. That, too, was ridiculously adorable. For a moment, we grinned at each other before she said, almost wheedlingly, "Can we hold hands?"

"Sure."

I put my hand out, and she covered it with both of hers. Her hands trembled. Maybe it was the nerves.

"I mean, we're girlfriends, after all," she said.

"Yeah."

Ajisai-san and I were the same height, so she looked into my eyes. There was so much affection in them, all aimed at me, but I didn't turn away this time.

I squeezed her hand back. "Yeah. We're dating."

"Mm-hmm." Ajisai-san closed her eyes, those eyes that were more beautiful than any sunset, and giggled. "I really like you, Rena-chan."

She took a step forward to close the distance between us. She tilted her head up slightly and slowly moved in, just like the time on the

Ferris wheel. But, unlike that time on the Ferris wheel, I closed my eyes.

Sure, maybe we'd run into big problems later on down the line. That wouldn't change my desire to do right by her—this girl more precious than any other person in the world, my girlfriend. Ajisai-san.

A soft sensation grazed my lips. My eyes snapped open.

"Ajisai-san!" I cried. She squeaked as I pulled her petite frame into a tight hug. "I like you too, Ajiisai-san. I really, really like you! I care for you so, so much!"

As I spoke to her, enfolded in her scent and hair, Ajisai-san flushed a bright red. But she met my eye and laughed. "I like you too, Rena-chan. I love everything about you."

Now it was her turn to hug me, and for a few moments we stood there in each other's arms. The setting sun, as we watched it from our vantage point on the rooftop, shone like a jewel. With all the love in my heart for her, I felt like now I could soar up, up and away through the sky…but that's probably just me exaggerating, don't you think?

The Sena Ajisaide of the Story
Season 2

As Ajisai was making dinner, Kouki asked her, “Hey, Oneechan, what’re you smiling about?”

She told him nothing, but later as she was helping wash dishes, her mother asked her, “Did something nice happen?”

Ajisai was at a bit of a loss. She wondered if she was as much of an open book as they made her out to be. Admittedly, yes, she was pretty elated—but it was only to be expected. After all, she’d been kept on hold for so long, and now she finally had her long-awaited reward.

“Good for you, Ajisai,” Mai told her later over a phone call as Ajisai curled up in bed. Mai’s voice sounded as lovely and clear, like golden light, as it ever was.

“Thanks. I’m really happy too. But Mai-chan are…are you okay with all this?”

There was no pretense in her voice as Mai said, “After your rendezvous with Renako, I, too, had her tell me how much she cared for me. So I’m perfectly all right.”

“Mm, that’s good to hear.”

Maybe Mai was just trying to act tougher than she felt. Or maybe she really meant it. Ajisai still couldn’t tell the difference, and possibly Mai herself didn’t even know, given how hard she tried to be strong.

But in spite of that—or rather, because of that—Ajisai-san said, “You know what, Mai-chan? Since we talked, I have a question for you too.”

“For me?”

“Yeah. What was your first kiss with Rena-chan like?”

“Ah. Well.” Mai sounded flustered, which Ajisai found so amusing she couldn’t help but laugh. Naturally, she figured it was less from embarrassment and more Mai’s concern that hearing it would cause Ajisai discomfort.

Hence, Ajisai pressed, “C’mon, tell me. It’s fine, we can talk about anything at this point. So long as I don’t know, I’m just gonna be curious, you know.”

“Hmmph,” Mai said. “Fine, fine. If you insist.”

Ajisai’s deliberately selfish demand put Mai on the spot. Presently, Ajisai had two goals. The first was to understand just what liking someone meant to Renako. No matter what, Renako persisted in thinking her feelings for Ajisai were one-sided, no matter how much Ajisai tried to explain otherwise. Therefore, she figured it was time for her actions to get the point across, although it’d certainly be an uphill battle.

Which brought her to the second goal.

“We were caught in a sudden rainstorm,” Mai said, “so I took her to a hotel.”

“A-a hotel?!”

Ajisai wanted Mai to be straight with her. Even if some things weren’t great to hear, or ended up hurting her, she wanted Mai to tell her them. Mai was by far a stronger person than Ajisai herself, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be hurt too. If both she and Ajisai were equal before Renako, then Ajisai wanted to shoulder part of the burden of Mai’s sadness and anxieties. Perhaps Mai had stronger feelings than ordinary girls. That thought worried Ajisai a little, but so be it, she decided. She had to nag the kiddos right and left if she wanted them to grow up to be model citizens. She cared about them more than anyone

else in the world, and she knew there was no way she could worry about formalities when she was dealing with them.

Three-way relationships were complex, uncertain, puzzling things. They required hard work from every party in order to maintain a balance. That was why—

“But you know,” Mai said, “Renako claims that one didn’t count as it was only a kiss between friends. I took that rather harder than I should have.”

“Huh?” Ajisai said. “Isn’t a kiss just, like, a regular kiss?”

That was why Ajisai wanted to do everything that she could for the sake of her very odd, very extraordinary girlfriends.

She used her hand to fan herself as, red-faced, she mumbled, “I-I’m amazed. I can’t believe you and Rena-chan, like, went that far already…”

“Not exactly.”

“Huh?! What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, there’s so much more to it; it’s a long story… You know what, I’ll tell you another time. For now, I wish you the best of luck in your own endeavors, Ajisai!”

“Wait, what long story? Hey, Mai-chan! Now I’m super curious! Hey. Hey! What long story?”

Now that all three were dating, things were sure to be a lot of fun, Ajisai thought. She wasn’t trying to act tougher than she felt or convince herself that was true. She was sincerely excited for what the future might hold.

Season 2
Prologue

"THAT SUCKED MAJOR BUTT," Kaho said, heaving a weary sigh as she sat alone in her bedroom. She'd happened to be hanging around after school when Renako had called her. That had led to, for some bizarre reason, a squadron headed by Takada Himiko lying in wait to trap Kaho in a maelstrom of violent apologies. They meant well with the apologies, she knew, but being on the receiving end of them demanded a lot of patience. If you asked her, it was friggin' exhausting.

"Who woulda guessed Takada Himiko and Nemoto Miki had such a fraught backstory?" she said to herself.

She'd gotten home around dusk and then sat down at her desk wondering what to do next. She could read manga or watch anime, or maybe start getting ready for her next big event. Ever since the last cosplay show, her follower count had been really picking up. There'd been some haters making fun of her placement in the competition, but that was nothing compared to the benefits of making a stage appearance. That meant her cosplay motivation was once again sky high. If she put a lot of effort in this year, then maybe she could even make her own photo book at the end of the year or next summer! As a girl raised on manga, Kaho was super into the prospect of making her own book. But above all else, the question begged: would it be a solo photo book or not? If they didn't end up flying off the shelves, she'd be disheartened…

"Eh, I'm not gonna get ahead of myself!" she said. "All righty, let's go make some clothes."

Just as she stood up, the doorbell rang.

“Oh ho.” Come to think of it, she had made plans today.

Kaho stampeded toward the door. Her visitor was a beautiful black-haired girl in an Ashigaya High School uniform: Koto Satsuki. Good, her ankle was doing better.

“Good evening,” Satsuki said.

“Heya, Saa-chan!”

“Thank you for having me.” Satsuki elegantly removed her shoes, lined them up, and stood while smoothing back her hair.

“Ooh…” Kaho sighed.

“What’s that for?” Satsuki asked.

“Girl, you’re freakin’ working it.”

Satsuki looked as if she didn’t have the faintest idea what that meant, but that was par for the course. Koto Satsuki was the sort of person who, by nature, would never have usually associated with someone like Kaho; as such, the two shared little to nothing of a common language. Compared to the manga and anime Kaho consumed, Satsuki’s books of choice were high literature, restricted to the kind found in libraries. She might dabble in light novels from time to time, but she was a long way removed from the internet slang Kaho employed.

“I gotta wonder, Saa-chan,” Kaho said, “how come we get along so well.”

“Where did that come from all of a sudden? Besides, I hardly think we get along so well as all that.”

“Um, rude? But it’s okay. I love seeing you act like this too.”

“Do you? Likewise, I appreciate the amount you pay me for my labor more than anything else.”

If Kaho had to say, she felt their friendship came from the fact that

they both could say whatever they liked to each other. It was comfortable to be transparent about the transactional nature of their relationship.

But I wasn't kidding when I said I love seeing her act this way, she thought to herself.

She led Satsuki to her room and immediately stuffed her into a brand-new outfit. Satsuki had agreed to participate in her next photo shoot, so today was the costume check. Kaho couldn't help but relish the moment.

"So, whatcha think, Saa-chan?" she asked.

"Well, it isn't too tight. It fits perfectly, in fact. However…"

Satsuki frowned as she looked down at herself in the new costume and its borderline risqué leotard that showed an awful lot of leg.

"I just feel as if the amount of fabric has shrunk again."

"Gosh, you think? Well, now that you mention it, the focus of this costume *is* the faux leather leotard. Because you're an isekai adventurer. See, Saa-chan, it's totally you."

"Ah."

Satsuki, checking her reflection in the mirror, didn't seem to be fully satisfied with that response.

Kaho, meanwhile, suffered a mental onslaught from Hurricane Satsuki. *Oh god, Saa-chan,* she thought. *You're so frickin' pretty. No one else out there is better suited to wearing these 2D character costumes than you. I can practically hear the costume I made singing Ode to Joy!*

She was so excited she was almost licking her lips. *Frickin' overwhelming beauty! The costume brings out the best in Saa-chan, and she brings out the best in the costume! As a cosplayer, I'm hella jelly, but as the costume maker, I couldn't be happier. I feel like I'm gonna be pulled apart*

trying to decide between delight and envy!

Kaho moaned in perverted joy. She was quite adept at using her introverted and extroverted personas when the situation demanded each, but on the rare chances when her emotions were at odds—which tended to happen around Satsuki—her inner personality was all too quick to slip out regardless of her efforts to prevent that. As an otaku, Koyanagi Kaho was a real introvert at heart.

"Saa-chan, you should be a cosplayer for realsies!" she said. "You have the talent to steal hearts the world over."

"No," Satsuki said. "I have no interest in that."

"Grr!"

If she'd been talking to Renako, this was the point where Kaho would have instinctively hit her with a rock, but her hands were tied with Satsuki. Holding down a part-time job to assist with her family's finances made Satsuki the loftiest being under the sun, and for her to scorn Kaho's beloved world of cosplay filled Kaho with an obscure thrill. Such was the ugly side of being an otaku.

"Oh, Saa-chan, I love it when you're mean," Kaho sighed.

"May I take this off now?"

"Wait, can't I take another 60,000 pictures first?"

"I'm taking it off."

Kaho grinned, all smiles even in the face of Satsuki's indifference.

"Say." Now back in her school uniform, Satsuki fixed her hair as she asked, "Kaho, do you like me?"

"Hm?" What an odd question. The oddness came less from the sense that Satsuki was actively asking something and more from the fact that Satsuki was curious about what anyone else thought of her. *Saa-chan always stays in her own lane,* Kaho thought. *But I guess she's got a*

kinda cute side too.

Without any hesitation, she said, “Yeah, totes! I love your face in particular. We totally stan.”

“I see.” There was a beat of silence.

Satsuki looked at Kaho for a moment and then asked, “In that case, will you go out with me?”

Kaho tilted her head. “Whatcha mean by that?”

Satsuki didn’t answer. Instead, she abruptly rose to her feet. “Never mind,” she said. “If we’re done here, I’m leaving.”

“Hey, Saa-chan—”

Satsuki speedwalked away as if trying to outrun her feelings. Kaho watched her go. She understood intuitively that if she let her get away now, Satsuki would likely never bring the topic up again. Kaho didn’t exactly mind, but nevertheless…

“Gotcha!”

Satsuki squeaked as Kaho tackled her around the waist. Both girls fell to the floor together, Satsuki in Kaho’s arms.

Satsuki twisted her head around in anger, a perfectly natural reaction, and spat, “Wh-what did you do that for? What on earth are you thinking?!”

“You can’t just not tell me anything, Saa-chan,” said Kaho.

“Yes, and surely one can’t spring violence on someone out of the blue either!”

Fair.

“Sowwy!” Kaho immediately flung herself prostrate on the ground.

Satsuki sighed, dumbfounded. “Good grief,” she said. “Look at you being ridiculous. I think Amaori’s worst points are rubbing off on you.”

“Very possible!” Kaho sat upright in the hallway and looked up at Satsuki. “So, what was that all about? Oh, I get it. ’Cause me ’n you are the only ones left over in the friend group, you think we might as well date too, right?”

“No.” Satsuki adjusted her hair.

If nothing else, at least she showed no sign of wanting to leave anymore. Having won time to postpone Satsuki’s departure, Kaho crossed her arms with a thoughtful “hmm.” Then it hit her.

“Wait, do you have a crush on Rena-chin?! So you’re heartbroken right now?”

“I’m going to hit you,” Satsuki said.

Kaho would rather not be hit, so she decided to switch the topic. *I really hope I didn’t hit the nail on the head there…* she thought. Aloud, she said, “So, like, do you have a crush on Mai instead?”

Kaho assumed she wouldn’t respond to that, which seemed to be the case at first. Kaho felt a tad awkward, as she’d once asked out Mai herself.

However, Satsuki said straight-out, “No.”

“Huh?”

Well, with that attitude, Satsuki really must not have had feelings for Mai. But that left Kaho even more stumped as to why Satsuki would ask her out. Unless…

“Wait, did you have a crush on Aa-chan?!” Kaho squealed.

That was the stickiest situation of them all!

“I…do like Sena, but not in that way,” Satsuki said.

That made sense to Kaho. Even she liked Ajisai—sweet, cute,

blessed with big boobies. But that didn't seem to be the answer to the puzzle either.

"Hey, Saa-chan." Kaho pinched the hem of Satsuki's uniform. "I'm sorry. I just, like, don't have a clue what you're feeling."

Satsuki didn't shake Kaho off. "Why are you apologizing?"

"'Cause I wanna help my bestie when she's stuck in a jam, y'know?"

"That's…a rather self-centered approach," said Satsuki. "Does what I want not matter?"

"Nope. Not a bit." Kaho had no qualms about agreeing even in moments like this one. "You know how I'm always messing around? That's what makes me the class pet, but to be real with you, I legit don't know any other way to act."

Satsuki remained silent, listening to Kaho go on.

"So when it comes to deep convos about relationships and stuff, I dunno how to handle 'em. I'm always goofin'. It's my job to turn things into a bit. But I feel like now's not the time for that, so I think it's time we spill our guts on each other."

"You mean *to* each other."

"Yeah!"

She pointed a finger right at Satsuki. But no, now wasn't the time for that. She shook her head. "I'm trying to say, like… I wanna hear what's going on inside your head. 'Specially if it's the kinda thing you can't tell anyone else."

"You really are bad at this."

Kaho scratched the back of her head. "I mean… If I can't do it, even cosplaying as an extrovert's not gonna save me, y'know? But now I'm supes good at faking it."

Satsuki sighed in defeat. “Have you ever had feelings for anyone before?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah…like for Mai-Mai. ’N stuff.”

Where was Satsuki going with this? Kaho’s response also didn’t fully answer the question. She wasn’t sure exactly how to put her feelings for Mai. Did she want to date Mai? Did she *like* like Mai? If she had to say…

Yet before she could put her ambiguous feelings into words, Satsuki continued on. “I see. Well, I haven’t.”

“Uh-huh.” Yeah, that tracked.

“Romance is like something out of a fairy tale, something that only exists in books,” said Satsuki. “That’s how I see it, at any rate. I suppose my home environment is partially to blame for this attitude. I had no need for romance in my life.”

She recounted this like it was something incredibly sad. Kaho wondered what on earth *that* was about.

“But, like, we’re only in our first year of high school still,” Kaho said. “Tons of kids have never had crushes yet. Our friends are just kinda an exception.”

“That is irrelevant to how I feel. You see…” Satsuki gnashed her teeth, “now *Mai* has a crush.”

What on earth…?

“Kaho,” Satsuki said.

“Yeah?” Kaho replied before immediately letting out a squawk as Satsuki placed her hands over both of Kaho’s ears. Satsuki’s lips moved, but Kaho couldn’t hear a thing.

“This is *Mai* we’re talking about,” Satsuki told her. “The very same Mai who has always seemed so vacant and lonely no matter what she

does. But now she looks as if she's come home after a very long journey. Is romance really that captivating? And if it is, why don't I understand it? It's *always* Mai."

She spoke each word with enough force to drive in a nail, and yet it all washed over Kaho. She picked up nothing apart from the look on Satsuki's face.

"You're smiling," she said, "and crying at the same time."

Mai had looked so happy on the stage at Makuhari Messe with Renako and Ajisai standing next to her, happier than Satsuki had ever seen her. And out of everything she couldn't stand, that took the cake.

More to herself than to Kaho, Satsuki said, "I want to know whatever it is that makes romance so incredible. Or, conversely, I'd love to know just how stupid it really is."

Mai's happy ending was only the beginning for Satsuki.

So, once again, she said, "I want to find out if I'm right or *she* is."

And then, having said her piece, she lifted her hands away from Kaho's ears. "There," she said. "I'm done."

Kaho stared at Satsuki blankly. "Saa-chan?"

"Yes?"

"Sorry, I know you're acting like you just wrapped up a big speech, but I didn't hear a darn thing you said."

"Oh? What a relief." Satsuki flipped her hair over her hand, in need of no one else's affirmation. "If you had, I would have no choice but to finish you off."

"Don't say something so cursed to someone whose ears were plugged with only your hands!" A perfectly justifiable objection in Kaho-

chan's book.

Just then, a dull vibrating noise sounded in the quiet hallway.

The blank expression snapped back onto Satsuki's face, as if she'd torn the previous face right off by the skin. She pulled her phone out of her pocket. "This is rare," she muttered.

Kaho gave her permission with a glance, and then Satsuki turned around. "Hello? Yes, Obasama, what can I do for you?"

Kaho noted that Satsuki used her most proper voice, like she was talking to a teacher. Talk about being a perfect beauty in and out.

"Yes, that would be no trouble at all," Satsuki said. "Yes, I understand. Yes."

She ended the phone call shortly, turned back around again, and announced, "I must take my leave."

As she headed for the front door, Kaho called, "Hey, Saa-chan!"

"What?"

As Kaho followed Satsuki out and watched her put on her shoes, she pouted. "Look, I dunno what's going on, but if you go and find someone really nice, I'm gonna be the only one in the friend group without a girlfriend. And that's gonna be lonely!"

"If that were to happen, you could ask out Amaori."

"Yeesh, when're you gonna stop making this Rena-chin's problem?!"

Kaho offered to walk Satsuki to the train station, but Satsuki left on her own and set off quickly. Kaho went back to her room, hugged a pillow to herself, and stared off into space. She really didn't get this whole romance thing yet. But even she felt anxious about it.

The Quintet was a chill friend group, and she knew she'd be perfectly happy if all five of them could stay pals for all three years of

high school. But that wasn't how things had turned out. Three of her closest buddies had gotten together, and Kaho knew she wasn't strong enough for things to stay the same.

"I guess this is how we're all kinda growing up…" she mumbled to herself.

Kaho flopped onto the floor.

And, unbeknownst to Kaho, Satsuki's story was on the verge of coming to life.

***

Satsuki arrived at an austere conference room.

Just after the phone call, a car had been sent to her home to pick her up and take her to the Queen Rose office in Shibuya, the progenitor of all information on fashion. With her fine posture and stately bearing, Satsuki fit in perfectly in this designer building. Anyone would assume she was one of the many models who frequented the location.

The receptionist led her to the conference room, where she was shortly granted an audience with this magnificent edifice's mistress.

The door opened with a clack and a "Thank you for coming." There she stood: Oduka Mai's birth mother. Oduka Renée. As ever, she resembled a scientist so enthralled in her research that she cared little for her own personal appearance. A girl who looked to be an assistant trailed in her wake.

"I regret that it has been so long since we last met, Obasama," Satsuki said.

"As do I. Come, come, find a seat."

Satsuki took a seat diagonally across from Oduka Renée's place of honor. The girl stood against the wall, piquing Satsuki's interest. "Who is she?" Satsuki asked.

The girl was quiet, young, and couldn't have been out of high school yet. However, she was clearly no model. She lacked the height for it, and, most importantly, no mere model would dare to stand before the empress Renée fighting back a yawn of boredom.

"Oh, don't worry about me," the girl said.

Satsuki gave her a sharp glance and then merely shrugged. Something about this smelled fishy to her.

Renée threw a piece of paper down on the desk. "This is related to the matter for which I've brought you here today."

Satsuki said nothing. She could make a pretty good guess what this was all about. Periodically, Oduka Renée would claim to want to talent scout Satsuki as a model, but she'd always digress and demand to hear about Mai. Given that this was the first time she'd been summoned before Renée since she started high school, Satsuki assumed this was more of the same. This was in spite of the fact that Renée should have heard all about her daughter's personal life from reports courtesy of Hanatori. According to Renée, this was because she couldn't afford to be boycotted again, which, to Satsuki—who'd been part of the old incident—felt like a painful old wound in the shin acting up. If Mai were to find out that Satsuki was having secret meetings to gossip about her behind her back, Satsuki was in no position to deny it. But Mai likewise also probably saw her mother at times when Satsuki wasn't there, so Satsuki forced herself to consider them equal and feel satisfied with the deal.

However, the photograph on the paper in front of her showed the last person Satsuki expected to see: Amaori Renako.

"Who is this?" Satsuki asked.

“One of your classmates,” Renée said. “Correct?”

“Yes, she is.”

What on earth was Oduka Renée, Mai’s mother, doing with a photo of Amaori Renako? Granted, Renako certainly wasn’t the sort of person who could be said to have no relation to Mai. If anything, she was horribly involved in Mai’s business.

An unpleasant feeling that something terrible was brewing swelled up in Satsuki like a hot air balloon.

“I met her just the once at a show,” Renée said, “and she claimed to be a friend of my daughter. However, were she any ordinary friend, Hanatori would not have hired a detective to run an investigation on her.”

“Hanatori-san hired a detective?”

“Exactly.”

Wow. That couldn’t end well. Satsuki looked away. At any rate, Satsuki considered Amaori Renako a friend (and had once said as much), and it would certainly make a lot of people cry were she to be submerged in the Tokyo Bay. So Satsuki really would have liked to smooth things over somehow, but…

As if showing off the specs of a new product, Renée laid out the facts in an utterly disinterested fashion. “The detective’s report was relayed to me. I collected it before Hanatori could lay eyes on it. Therefore, she doesn’t know any of the things I’m about to tell you.”

“All right,” Satsuki said. “What is it?”

Just then, the girl who’d melted into the background interrupted. “Um, hey—I don’t really think this is a good idea. But, like, they picked me out ’cause we go to the same school, and what choice do I have when I’m an apprentice detective and the president of Queen Rose is

threatening me? Anyway, those're the results."

So this girl was a private detective, Satsuki realized. Awfully young for a detective. Now that she mentioned it, though, Satsuki did have to admit that she seemed to have the same kind of worldliness as the ladies at her mother's workplace.

Naturally, Hanatori must have ordered a background check on Amaori Renako because she had suspicions about Renako's relation to her mistress. That Hanatori didn't find out about the duplicity of their relationship was the silver lining in this whole debacle, but, as a result, Renako was put into an even worse predicament: of all people, Mai's mother had found out.

"Did you know?" Renée asked.

Apart from Amaori Renako, the photograph also contained Oduka Mai and Sena Ajisai. The evidence was conclusive at this point.

Satsuki debated over whether or not to put herself in a great deal of danger for Amaori Renako. At last, half spurred on by a sense of duty, she said, "Excuse me, Obasama. I'm afraid she would never—"

***

Renée interrupted. "Did you know she's dating four girls at the same time?"

That gave Satsuki pause. She blinked a few times. *Four?*

"Which four, might I ask?"

"I understand why you don't want to admit it to me," Renée said. She gave Satsuki an almost pitying look, one that Satsuki had never seen before in her life.

Renée riffled through the documents. There were pictures of Satsuki and Kaho too—one of Satsuki backing Renako up against a wall in an empty classroom, and one of Renako and Kaho huddled together and peering into the school gym.

"I beg your pardon," Satsuki said.

"I'd planned to turn a blind eye to anything if it was for Mai's own good. But this goes too far. I mean, four people? And all girls to boot. Do they allow that sort of thing in Japanese high schools?"

Renée didn't sound mad, simply suspicious. This flummoxed Satsuki. How could she possibly respond?

"I don't believe they do, no…" she said.

"Then how come this Amaori girl is carrying on without a care in the world instead of being locked up? I should have taken Mai to France after all, whether she wanted to go or not."

Renée looked downcast, making her appear—naturally—the very picture of Mai. However, at rare moments, Satsuki caught glimpses of weakness in her demeanor that Mai did not employ. Perhaps Renée truly wanted to help her daughter.

The other girl put her hand to her chest and sighed. "I just couldn't believe it either! She looks like the kind of girl who'd back down if you tried anything on her. But I bet she could even be five-timing your daughter, ma'am!"

"Wait a minute." It hit Satsuki—she'd seen this girl somewhere before. "Say, aren't you one of the…followers of the Class B group?"

"Oh, me? I'm not that close with Himiko-chan."

"But aren't you one of the members of that friend group with the ridiculous name?"

The girl laughed. "Yeah, I guess it is pretty stupid that they call

themselves the 5déesses to take on the Quintet, even though there's only four of them. Well, not much you can do about it, huh?"

Then, setting that aside, she continued, "So this girl is dating Oduka Mai, going out with Sena Ajisai, *and* having a relationship with Koto Satsuki on top of all that, *and* fooling around with Koyanagi Kaho and calling her 'wifey' on top of all *that*. So the president says we can't let her go on unchecked." The girl—Terusawa Youko—lifted a finger and nodded.

Satsuki looked back at Renée. "Pardon me, Obasama," she said. "I don't believe Amaori is carrying on relations with four people. At the very least, she and I are not…"

As she began, she suddenly broke off into contemplation. This situation, she thought, might well and truly be a terrible predicament for Renako—one that, if handled poorly, could end up with her dropped in the Bay. But there was hardly a difference between four-timing versus two-timing, so perhaps that didn't matter. Still, what about Satsuki? Perhaps…?

"I want to find out," she had said, and her own voice hit her hard. How much was she prepared to do in order to find out? Her voice questioned her own resolve. Well, the answer to that was…

Satsuki lifted her head. "Obasama," she said with a thin smile. "You know, I think you're right. You cannot let this go on unchecked. However, Amaori Renako still has a strong influence over Mai. If you were to simply try and persuade your daughter, I fear it would backfire and have the opposite effect."

"Yes, it is shameful for a mother to butt into her daughter's love affairs," Renée said. "And above all else, Mai is still young. But she gives me no choice."

She looked down at her watch and then, as if the unhappy reality

had slapped her in the face, she said, “Ah, it’s a quarter past. At any rate, now is an important time for her. We need Mai’s ability for Queen Rose to be recognized the world over, both in terms of what we attain and what is our due.”

Renée rose.

“Yes, Obasama.” Satsuki clenched her hands into tight fists, out of Renée’s sight. She took a moment to set aside her feelings so they wouldn’t appear on her face, and then placed a hand on her chest.

“Therefore,” she said, “I ask that you please leave the matter of Amaori Renako to me.”

One couldn’t stay silent when suffering the disgrace of a girl four-timing her daughter. With such just cause, Renée looked at Satsuki with blue eyes so like her daughter’s. “You?”

“Yes.” Satsuki nodded. She knew Renée wouldn’t suspect anything of her. Renée was socially awkward, yes, but she wasn’t a bad person. In fact, she was just like her daughter in that regard.

However, Youko clapped her hands. “Ooh!” she said. “In that case, we should have a competition!”

“Of what sort?” Satsuki asked.

“See, I was just about to take on the Amaori thing for work too. You’re concerned for your daughter, aren’t you, ma’am? So this is perfect. One of the services we detectives offer is breaking off relationships, and that means…” Youko spread her arms out wide like a business woman proposing a project, “we’ll compete to see who can make Amaori Renako and Oduka Mai break up. Whoever manages it gets my completion bonus. How does that sound?”

Satsuki said nothing. She looked back at Youko. Why had she suggested a competition? What on earth was going on inside Youko's head? However, if Satsuki really did just want the money, she should, by rights, go along with it. And if that was really her only motive…

Slowly and deliberately, Satsuki declared, "Do whatever pleases you. I have my own objectives."

Youko stared at Satsuki for several moments and then giggled as cheerfully as the main character of a shoujo manga. "Gotcha," she said. "Hey, let's compare notes when we see each other around. I bet high school's gonna get a lot more fun now, huh?"

"Yes, it will." Koto Satsuki gave her a witchy grin, which made Youko smile all the more cheerfully.

As Renée stood before the two girls and their contrasting grins, she murmured, "*On n'a qu'une vie*. We have but one life in which to live. I don't want you to look back on this, Mai, and regret what you've done."

She stared at the photograph of the girls with foreboding in her eyes.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. My name is Teren Mikami.

And welcome to *TNFWIBYLU* season two!

What the heck's up with the 488 pages thing in the Japanese release? Well, fun fact: light novels are usually capped at 300 pages because there's data that shows this is a good number for sales and profit. That's why you get so many books that are 256 pages or 272 pages or whatever. Therefore, when a book gets as big as this one, you should probably split it into two smaller volumes. I would have liked to do that. But. I wasn't able to… There just wasn't anywhere to make a good split. That's because I thought the story would be way, way shorter!

I even told my editor, "Oh, I'm going to make Volume 5 a short one. It's just going to be everyday fun kind of stuff. Volume 4 was definitely a chunker, wasn't it? (ha ha)"

But if you'd asked me what could be cut out, the only answer I could have given you was my vital organs. This means I declare: Volumes 6 and 7 will both be two-parters! And I'll do my best to get them both to you as soon as possible. If that doesn't work out, you have my permission to bury me under a tree. Ta-da!

Okay, now let's see. They gave me a whopping six pages for the afterword in the Japanese release, so I'll do my best to talk about Season 2 topics without giving away any spoilers. Let's go!

1. So what the heck is Season 2 anyway? (Contains slight

spoilers for Volume 5)

Let's recap.

Season 1 was pretty straightforward, as the plot was carried along with each character having their own book. Volume 1 was Mai-chan, Volume 2 was Satsuki-san, Volume 3 was Ajisai-san, and finally, Volume 4 closed out the season and featured Kaho-chan.

By way of comparison, the structure of Season 2 is a little more complex. I'm trying to think of how to explain this simply, stripping away all the complicated stuff and just leaving the interesting bits. Part of the reason why the page count got so high this time is because the foreshadowing took up more space than I had figured it would. And since this was the second season, I trotted out a bunch of new characters to be a review of the first season. This series sure has a lot of characters, huh… But I just love them all.

Ah, right. That reminds me of something else I need to say.

This is kind of going into spoiler territory for Volume 5, but in this volume we got another girl who seemed like an extra protagonist. (There goes the roster, expanding again!) However, from now on, the main cast will be the five Quintet girls like always. This is just my personal preference, but do you ever start reading a story where the main characters start getting less screen time and the minor characters become the new leads? Don't you get kind of an "Oh…" feeling? I know I do. Of course, there are lots of stories out there that do that and turn out all the better for it, but my goal in writing is to make you fall even further in love with the Quintet over time. I'm the type of trainer who takes the first Pokémon she catches all the way to the Elite Four.

To sum it all up, I'm going to do my best to make you fall in love with Mai-chan, Satsuki-san, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-chan! Good luck out there, Renako.

2. The Satsuki-san cliffhanger in Volume 4

I'm so sorry to have kept you all waiting on this for so long.

That's Satsuki-san's rash side coming out, huh? And it's not like an "Oopsies, I actually did it!" kind of thing either. It'll still take some more time to deal with that bombshell she dropped. After all, I heard deactivating a bomb is a complicated, time-consuming process. Likewise, I think it might be a while before this story reaches its conclusion.

(But at the very least, given all the trouble I put you through in Volume 4 and how much you wanted an answer, we all know it'd be awful if I had Renako go in the next volume, "Oh yeah, I'm totally dating Satsuki-san too lololol Yay! lololol" You wouldn't allow me to do that, right??)

Still, this series is one of those that never drags things out and always puts the pedal to the metal, so… Maybe when I write Volume 6, Satsuki-san will suddenly start dating Renako or someone else… You see, even I have no idea what Satsuki-san will do.

At any rate, just like there are perks to dating her, there are perks to having her as a friend. Before their relationship can be taken to the next level (and I have no idea what that means!), I think it'd be nice to let the readers get a full, exhaustive look at all the fun things that could only happen with their current relationship. And that's what I'm doing my best to accomplish. Good luck out there, Renako.

3. The cliffhanger in this volume

There's a lot of wild stuff brewing, huh? How on earth is this going to turn out? Well, good luck out there, Renako.

4. In conclusion

In the 2021 Next Light Novel Award presented in February 2022, this series won numerous awards, including the grand prize for new works. This is all thanks to the support of the readers. Thank you all very much. I truly believe I've only been able to write up to this point because of all your comments and reviews saying stuff like, "Yeah, I guess it's kinda funny." I would be delighted if I could repay the favor by writing more of this funny story for you. I'm doing my best to make you say, "Season 1 was good, but Season 2's even more hilarious!" So please enjoy. First off, Volume 6 will feature Amaori Haruna as the main character! Hey, Renako, are you upset that your little sister is stealing your thunder?

Now that I've gone on for long enough, I'd like to proceed to the acknowledgments.

First off, a huge congrats to Eku Takushima-sensei for the anime adaptation of her series *Whisper Me a Love Song*. Woo-hoo! I can't wait to see all of the characters Takushima-san draws so charmingly moving around. And thank you once again for the delightful illustrations. A good tenth of this series' popularity is thanks to you, heh heh. The bath scene in Volume 5 was amazing, so I'm putting together another fantastic bathing scene for Volume 6, heh heh.

And thank you to my editor Khara-san for everything! Thank you for adding amazingly funny corrections to Volume 5. I'm the kind of person whose pen is powered by praise, so a good tenth of always being able to write this series without compromises is due to you, heh heh.

Also, thank you to everyone who has helped me publish this book. In particular, I apologize for sending in unrealistic demands to the

designers in every volume. But thanks to them, we end up with books packed with playfulness and fun! I hope!

I'd also like to give huge thanks to Musshu-sensei, the artist who draws the manga version of this series, and her editor Amida-san. I can attribute another good tenth of *TNFWIBYLU*'s success thus far to these two, heh heh. I look forward to seeing the new manga chapters every month. Grr… Curse these two. They make me fall in love with Renako harder by the minute…

Also, Volume 5 of this series's manga drawn by the very same Musshu-san is coming out on March 17th in Japan! They're now starting on the Ajisai-san arc from Volume 3! Zoom!

Also also, you should check out my other GL romcom *AriOto*! It's not goofy, like this series, but kind of steamy. Volume 7 gets a little hoo-cha-cha, so…watch out!

And with that, I hope to see you again in Volume 6. Wh-which I'll make as fast as possible…

Teren Mikami, signing off!

Creator Bios

AUTHOR BIO

Teren Mikami

BORN ON DECEMBER 16 IN SAITAMA

I spent 2022 thinking about nothing but girls × girls, and I'm pretty sure 2023 will go the exact same way.

My favorite basketball player is Sakuragi Hanamichi from *Slam Dunk*.

It's all going to be okay, because this is a Teren Mikami yuri book!

ILLUSTRATOR BIO

Eku Takeshima

BORN ON APRIL 23 IN OKAYAMA

I am a manga artist and illustrator specializing in yuri.

Thanks for waiting for Volume 5!

I really do love drawing the girls in this series, so getting to start my 2023 by drawing them was a joy. Thank you, *TNFWIBYLU!*

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